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HALO 5 GUARDIANS

COULD IT MAKE OR BREAK XBOX ONE? FULL DETAILS INSIDE

PS4 AND XBOX ONE
EVERY BIG RELEASE

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

First Wii U gameplay impressions

PS4'S SHOCK EXCLUSIVE

Street Fighter V joins the console war

JUST CAUSE 3

How Avalanche will put GTA V to shame



DigitalEdition
GreatDigitalMags.com
ISSUE 156

HIGHLIGHTS

BLOODBORNE ■ METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN ■ HUMAN ELEMENT
RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER ■ EVOLVE ■ THE DIVISION ■ FINAL FANTASY XV
BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT ■ THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT ■ OVERWATCH

The second full year of a new generation of consoles can be massive. In 2007 as the Xbox 360 headed into year two, it saw the release of *BioShock*, *Halo 3*, *The Orange Box*, *Assassin's Creed* and (personal favourite) *Skate* to name only a few games. By any measure, that was a good year for the console and a good year for the generation as the promise of HD gaming began to be realised.

The same was true for the PS2 as 2002 brought with it *Rez*, *Twisted Metal: Black Online*, *Marvel Vs Capcom 2* and perhaps most importantly *GTA: Vice City*. And then the Xbox's second year also brought *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Freedom Fighters* and *SoulCalibur II*, among others.

I guess what I'm getting at is that since PS4 and Xbox One both launched at the same time, 2015 should bring with it a simultaneous push and acceleration of quality from both consoles. And third parties, having had at least 18 months or so with the machines should be able to get more out of them than we've seen to date. The triple-A offerings of 2014 may have let you down, but I have to say I'm feeling confident about what's in store.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR






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HALO 5 GUARDIANS

Will 343's second attempt at redefining Halo's multiplayer make or break Xbox One?

Discuss

NEWS
INDUSTRY GOSSIP
OPINION
YOUR VIEWS

(SO MANY BROKEN GAMES)

A Glitch In The System
The Trouble With Triple-A

→ Delays, bugs, day-one patches and broken online components: several big-budget games have launched in a compromised state recently. Why is this happening? And is it likely to change any time soon? **games**™ investigates…

***DriveClub* was supposed** to be one of PlayStation 4's big hitters. Every console needs a flagship racer, and with the next edition of *Gran Turismo* likely to be years away from release, that mantle passed to Evolution Studios. More significantly, it was a game at the centre of Sony's socially-focused vision for the console. We were promised that this would be truly connected, next-gen racing. Just ahead of PS4's arrival, Sony announced that *DriveClub* had been delayed until early 2014. At the time, Sony Worldwide Studios boss Shuhei Yoshida said: "The team requires more time in order to deliver on their vision – and I'm fully confident the game will surpass your expectations."

When *DriveClub* finally arrived, almost a year to the day of the original delay announcement, expectations were not surpassed. In fact, they weren't even met. Despite the developer running a series of pre-launch stress tests, the servers simply couldn't cope, with players regularly unable to connect. Evolution Studios decided to operate a one-in, one-out policy, which was understandably greeted with anger and disappointment on forums and social media. Meanwhile, the promised free PlayStation Plus version of the game – which Sony had extensively used in its promotion of the service – was postponed until further notice in order to ease the strain. By the end of November, players were still experiencing technical issues, and there was no sign of the free version materialising.



Above *Assassin's Creed Unity*'s launch was hounded by glitching issues, roundly mocked by gamers.

Yet *DriveClub*'s disastrous launch is far from the only recent example of a big-budget game releasing in less than ideal condition. *Assassin Creed: Unity*'s glitches are legion, widely criticised along with the game's inconsistent frame-rate. Ubisoft responded by releasing three patches in short order, while the publisher's Montreal &

DATA STREAM → UBISOFT CONFIRMS ASSASSIN'S CREED VICTORY WILL BE THE NEXT IN THE SERIES

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Your guide to the essential stories

> "Developers will be the ones fighting passionately against the publisher-imposed deadlines to get more time for issues to be resolved"

Toronto CEO Yannis Mallat issued an apology, promising that the upcoming *Dead Kings* DLC would be free for everyone, with existing Season Pass holders given the option to download one of a handful of Ubisoft games for no extra charge. *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* and *World Of Warcraft* expansion *Warlords Of Draenor* also both suffered at launch, with the former's online component all but inaccessible and the latter suffering from long queue times.

Games launching with significant problems isn't actually a new phenomenon, as experienced designer Sam Barlow (*Silent Hill: Shattered Memories*) points out – it's just that in the internet age they come under much closer scrutiny. "It's human nature when you have projects with huge engineering complexity that people end up underbidding and responding to pressure from above by estimating optimistically," he says. "These projects always then take longer. Think about high profile construction works, any large infrastructure projects – the pyramids probably missed their ship date. So games have always been buggy, but now we have social media and YouTube to share the bugs. In the Eighties, bugs were urban myths, a bit magical. You heard about them second hand, they weren't plastered over the front page of every gaming website. Speaking to developers who made the 8-bit games of my youth I've heard so many confessions — about the games that shipped unwinnable because they ran out of time, so they made the game so hard or just put literal brick walls in the way."

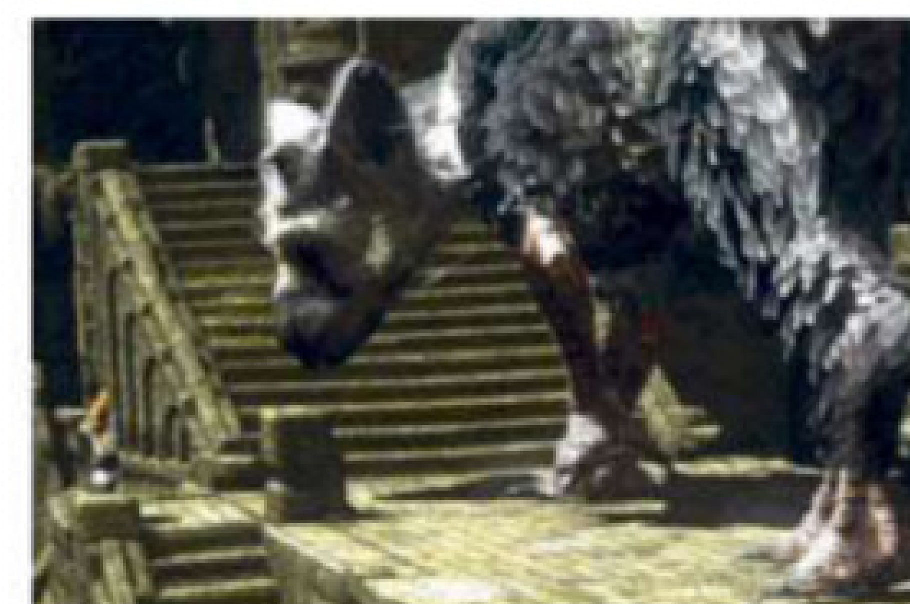
THIS ISSUE IS naturally exacerbated by the complexities of modern games: when you have a product with so many moving parts, you obviously increase the chance of one or more of those parts breaking down. In turn, quality assurance becomes more challenging, because testers have much more ground to cover, many more ways to try to break the game. Games can be released with 99% of their content in full working order, but it's the 1% that will be picked out and pulled apart, as the internet collectively turns its harsh spotlight on the glitches and flaws.

Above The nature of cross-platform development will sometimes lead to one version of the game suffering next to its counterparts on other hardware. *Skyrim* had bugs on all formats, but was borderline unplayable for some PS3 owners.

Johnnemann Nordhagen, a veteran of Sony and 2K Marin, who programmed *Gone Home* and has since founded Dim Bulb Games, says that in his experience game developers know everything that is wrong with their game – and that it's often more than players will ever see. "They will be the ones fighting passionately against the publisher-imposed deadlines in order to try to get more time for their features, bugs, or other issues to be resolved," he says. "There's definitely a realisation that games need to sell well – or the whole team might be laid off – but when you've poured years of your life into a



Inset Despite being an online game, *The Crew* launched with some significant issues, not least troubles forming a titular crew to drive with.



Above It's rare a publisher will delay a release indefinitely yet continue working on it. Team ICO's *The Last Guardian* is the exception.

LATEST WITCHER 3 DELAY DUE TO CD PROJEKT NOT WANTING BUGS TO UNDERMINE GAMEPLAY

More money, more problems?

→ The broadening ambition of big-budget games naturally means developers have a lot more to fit in than they used to, while publishers' desire to balance the books can enforce unrealistic launch dates. But there are several reasons why games ship in an unfinished state. Here are four of the most significant ongoing issues that need to be addressed...



ALL ABOUT E3

PRODUCING DEMOS or 'vertical slices' for E3 and other trade shows can cause numerous problems, says Sam Barlow. "The coolest gun in the game is dragged into the intro level and some poor designer has to hack everything to make that work. And good luck putting that gun back where it was supposed to be once everyone has got used seeing the demo." Not only does this irritate players, who notice, but it's inefficient for developers, too. "They're running before they can walk, building the chassis before they've figured out the engine," says Barlow.



ALWAYS ONLINE

BUGS ARE found in plenty of offline games, says Barlow, and are waived because they either make very little difference to the game, or no one would realistically encounter them during normal play. "However, online is a whole other beast," Barlow tells us. "You need to deal with a class of bug that you have no way to actually find before shipping because they don't occur until you have a certain number of real players putting real strain on servers. The best solution for this seems to be an open beta, but sometimes even that isn't big enough."



CRUNCH TIME

DEVELOPERS ARE often under fierce pressure to hit a specific release date, which usually means staff working seven days a week, and longer hours each day, in order to get the game ready on time. Yet this makes developers less predictable, says Brett Douville: "There's a mountain of research about the negative impact of crunch. Short bursts of crunch are generally okay, but longer than only a few weeks and you're probably hurting your schedule. Throwing more people at a problem isn't necessarily helpful either, since they may not have the institutional knowledge to contribute fully – and may even hinder at times."



BOUNCEBACKABILITY

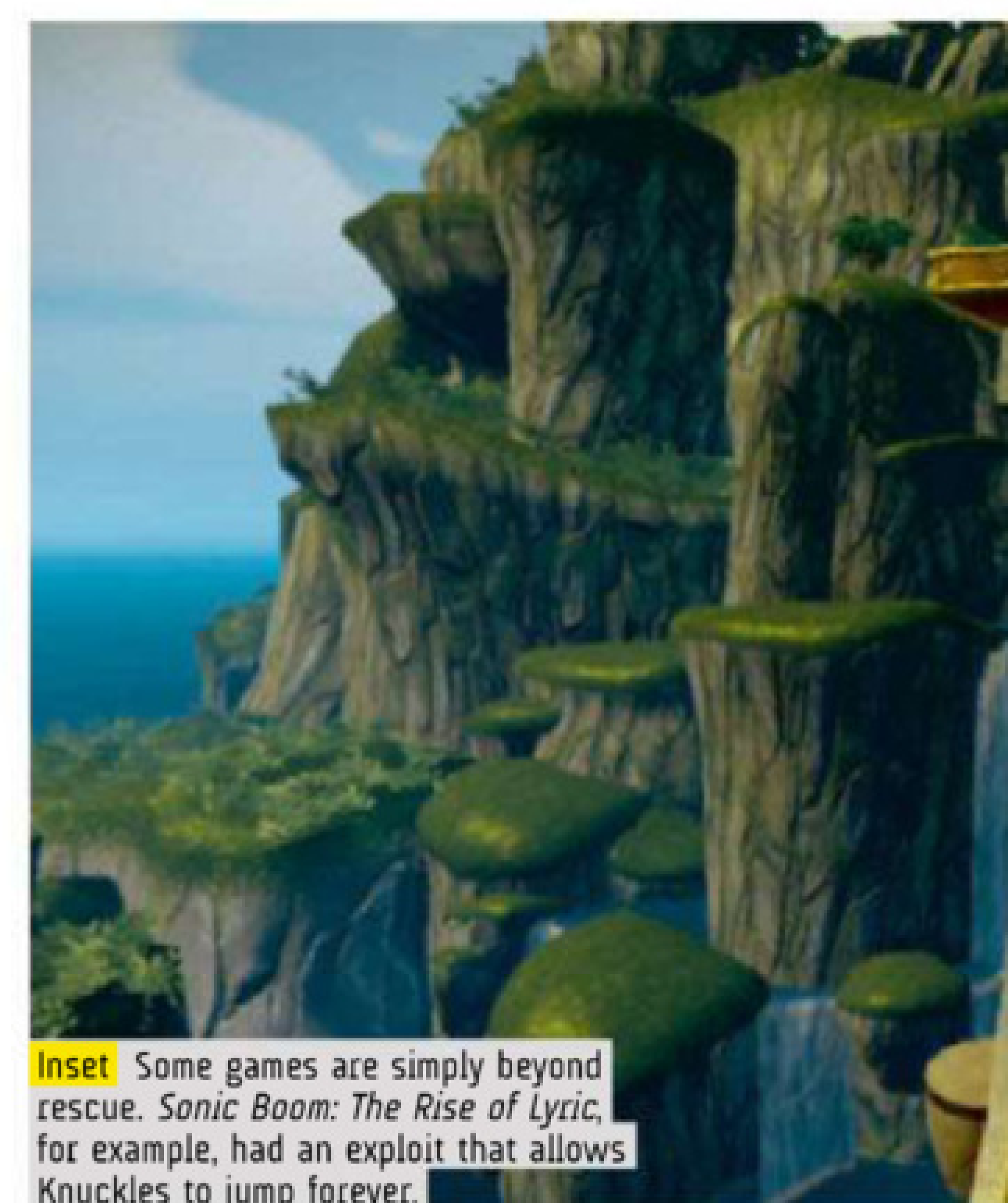
NEGATIVE RECEPTION of an individual entry in a franchise is not necessarily a reputation killer, suggests Douville, especially if it's an established series. "I know *Assassin's Creed III* was not as well received as [previous] games, but the series came roaring back with *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*. It's possible that a publisher will choose simply to ride out short-term reputation problems if they think they will be less damaging than missing the date." One could say the same for *Call of Duty: Ghosts* and *Advanced Warfare*: as long as you follow up a flop strongly, your series can seemingly survive a bad year.



Inset In 2013, *Grand Theft Auto V*'s MMO component GTA Online was plagued with problems. Most players couldn't connect for days, some lost single-player save data and these problems weren't fixed until some time later.

project, you want to ship something that you can be proud of. And that means both putting in tons of hours or crunch time to try to fix those issues, and pushing back against the publisher or business folks, trying to get more time or more resources to be able to bring the game out in the best [condition]."

So why don't publishers delay games more often when they're clearly not going to be finished in time? In truth, over the past few years we've started to see projects slipping by a few months or more – *Battlefield: Hardline*'s



Inset Some games are simply beyond rescue. *Sonic Boom: The Rise of Lyric*, for example, had an exploit that allows Knuckles to jump forever.

DATA STREAM → NO MAN'S SKY MULTIPLAYER WILL BE MOSTLY WITH STRANGERS, SAYS HELLO GAMES





launch being shifted back into 2015 is merely the most high-profile of recent cases – but these are still the exceptions to the norm.

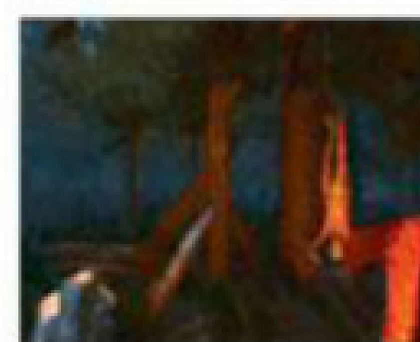
Brett Douville is a former lead programmer at Bethesda Game Studios, who worked on *Fallout 3* and *Skyrim*. Though he's reluctant to give specific examples, naturally, he's been privy to a number of publisher decisions of this nature. He agrees with our other interviewees that these decisions are driven almost exclusively by economic issues. "Publicly-traded publishers who establish business expectations based on annual product models expect a certain amount of income every year from these franchises," he says. "Quality can suffer as a result."

Part of the problem is a financial need to hit that crucial holiday launch date. A pre-Christmas release really is that important, says Nordhagen. "I've heard amazing figures bandied about," he tells us. "Many things for that season have to be prepared well in advance – ad buys, store placement, so on, all have to be negotiated and paid for months ahead of time. Missing the deadline doesn't only miss out on sales, it impacts the marketing campaign and the relationship of the publisher with the retail partners."

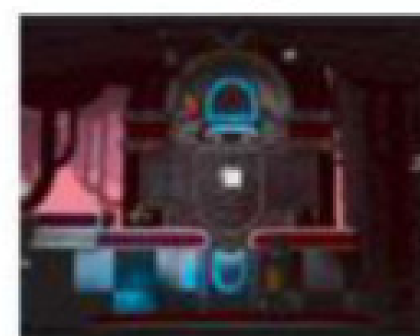


"ANNUAL EXPECTATIONS and track records cut both ways," adds Douville. "Developers know that they are expected to deliver at that time, and who wants to be the lead producer or programmer who is the one to break that schedule and let down the company?" This, he says, can lead to a range of communication problems, from overly optimistic scheduling to misread signals about what can reasonably be expected.

> "The classic 'vertical slice' has changed. What used to be a development focused milestone is now a slave to marketing"



Above With the rise in popularity of alpha/ beta releases, and Steam's Early Access service in the past few years, perhaps players don't mind any more?



Above *LittleBigPlanet 3* arrived with a day-one patch that fixed problems present in the game's review build. Yet players still reported import issues.

The sheer scale of the modern triple-A title means a huge marketing investment, and that can ultimately outweigh any development concerns. But marketing can also actively infect the development process in a very damaging way, as Barlow explains.

"The proportion of budget spend necessitates getting marketing sign off earlier in the process, and requires that external parties commit to sales targets," he says. "This means that early development work is increasingly steered to help this process. It means that important milestones such as the classic 'vertical slice' have changed beyond all recognition. What used to be a development-focused milestone is now a slave to marketing. Game mechanics are sidelined and dropped in the priority list in order to amp up spectacle and streamline the experience to produce a 'playable trailer'. Money is spent on razzle-dazzle and the whole development process is upturned."

With more time and effort invested in spectacle instead of the more important – though naturally less marketable – preparatory work, it's little wonder that development teams are increasingly struggling to cope with the workload, and that's before you factor in the pressure of crunch periods. Only consumer response, it seems, is capable of forcing a change in approach. Until we see a widespread rejection of the practice of 'release first, patch later', it's likely that this problem is only going to continue – if not worsen.



PHIL SPENCER WANTS TO "MAKE AMENDS" FOR STREET FIGHTER V NOT COMING TO XBOX ONE

(THE DEVIL MAKES WORK FOR IDLE HANDS)

Is It Possible To Make A Game A Week?

What do you do when you've moved on from triple-A production? In order to chase creative satisfaction and freedom, Adriel Wallick set out on her own to cater events for gamers and eventually started making a game a week for an entire year, pushing her design and programming skills to the limit…

We caught up with Wallick during Nottingham's Game City to ask how the hell you go about making a game every week, and what the process has taught her about development…



Above Before her game a week project Wallick worked on *Rock Band Blitz* and several Unity-based flash games.

What do people normally ask you about the 'one game a week' thing?
It's like, 'Why?' and, 'How do you come up with ideas?' and, 'Is a week long enough to make a game?' and, 'When are you going to stop?' but that one doesn't get asked that much anymore because I've, like, said, 'Hey, I'm going to stop after a year,' although I recently found somebody on the Internet who has made a game a week for six years, which made me feel incredibly insignificant. Not only that, like, his most recent game was year 6 week 40. I was just like, 'Wow.'

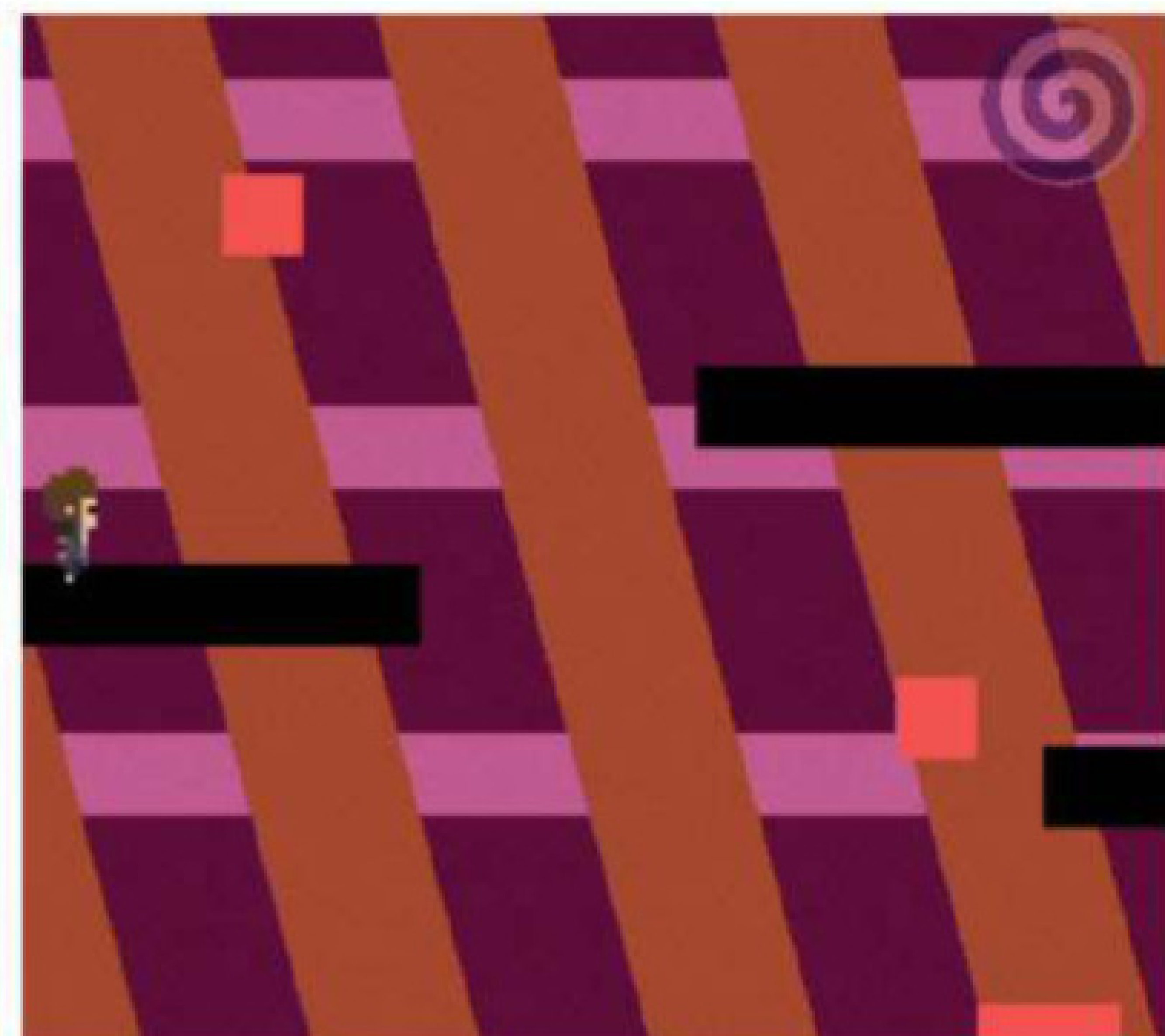
Are you still going to stop after a year?
I think so. So, the reason I even started doing the game a week thing at all, was that I had this block of just not being able to do anything because I had no deadlines and all of a sudden I had all of this freedom, and it was a thing I'd always wanted to do and I was just like, 'Ah, it's scary.' So I started doing it to sort of train myself to get better at design and all the stuff that I didn't have to do before when I was on teams, because before, you know, I was a programmer with a little bit of design input or stuff like that.

I'm exhausted, because coming up with an idea every single week is really, really hard, and at this point I at least need to take a break from a game a week. I reached out to that guy who's done it for six years saying 'How? How?' and he was just like, 'Well, I take a lot of breaks,' and I'm like, 'Okay. That makes sense,' because I've just sort of been doing it non stop, here and there with a *week* where I just haven't done anything!

How are you finding the process now compared to when you started? What's the biggest change?
I'd say the biggest change is that I know what I'm doing more. The first few weeks' games, if you go and look at them, are almost unplayable because I had no idea how to budget my time or what would go into an idea or what would go into a mechanic that I was thinking of. So by the end of the first few weeks I ended up with things that are just horrible because I didn't know how to do any of that. Now, I'm a lot better at being able to determine what mechanic I can explore in a week and, sort of, how to explore that, how to restructure what I'm thinking in order to finish something in a week, just in case I over-scope, or if I under-scope and I know I can do something more.

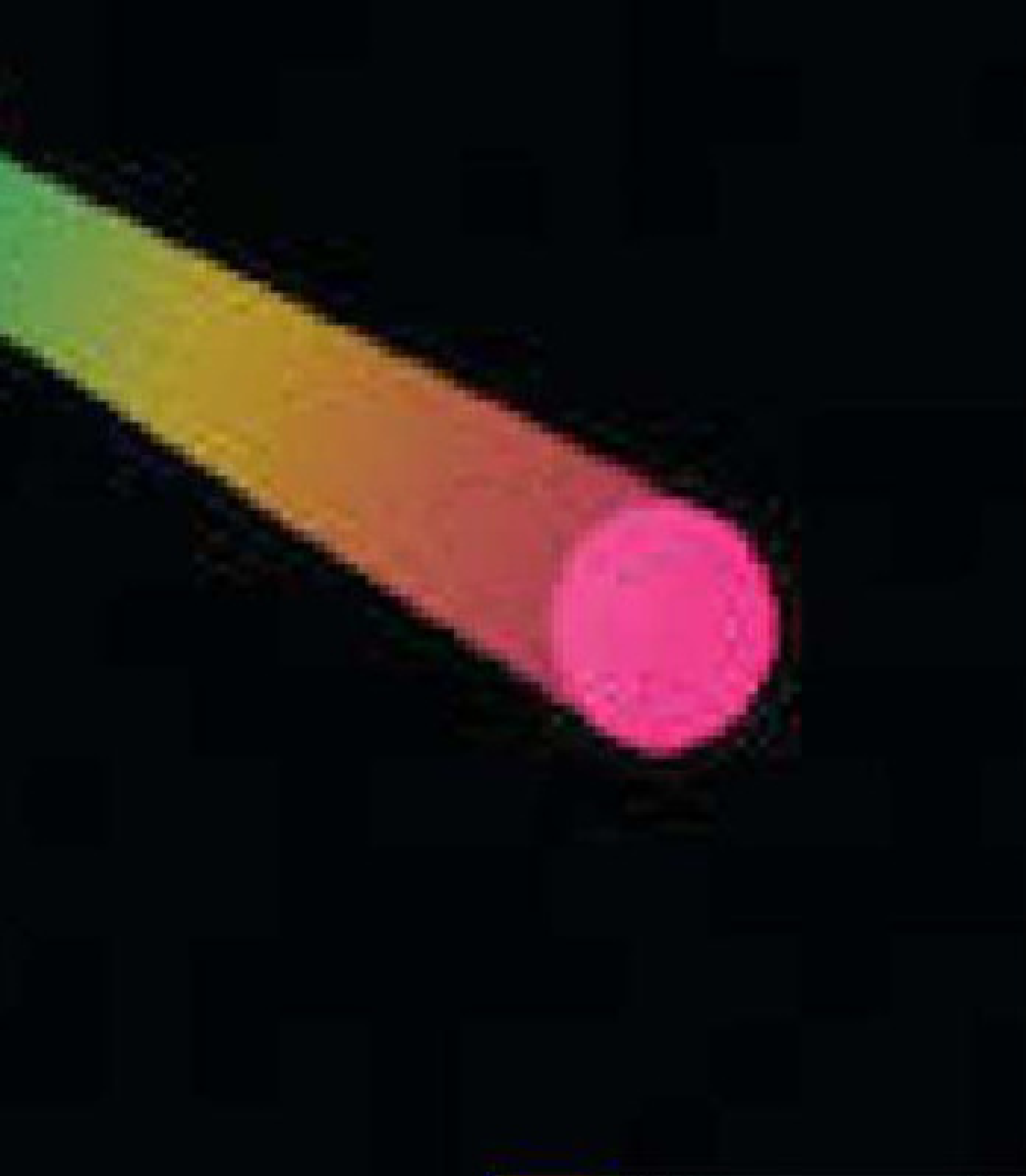
> "I started doing it to train myself to get better at design"







EA HAS ASSURED FANS THAT FINAL STAND WILL NOT BE THE END OF SUPPORT OR DLC FOR BATTLEFIELD 4



Inset Week 45's game was called *Proto* and saw you place planetary bodies around the screen to redirect a meteor.

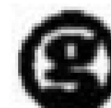


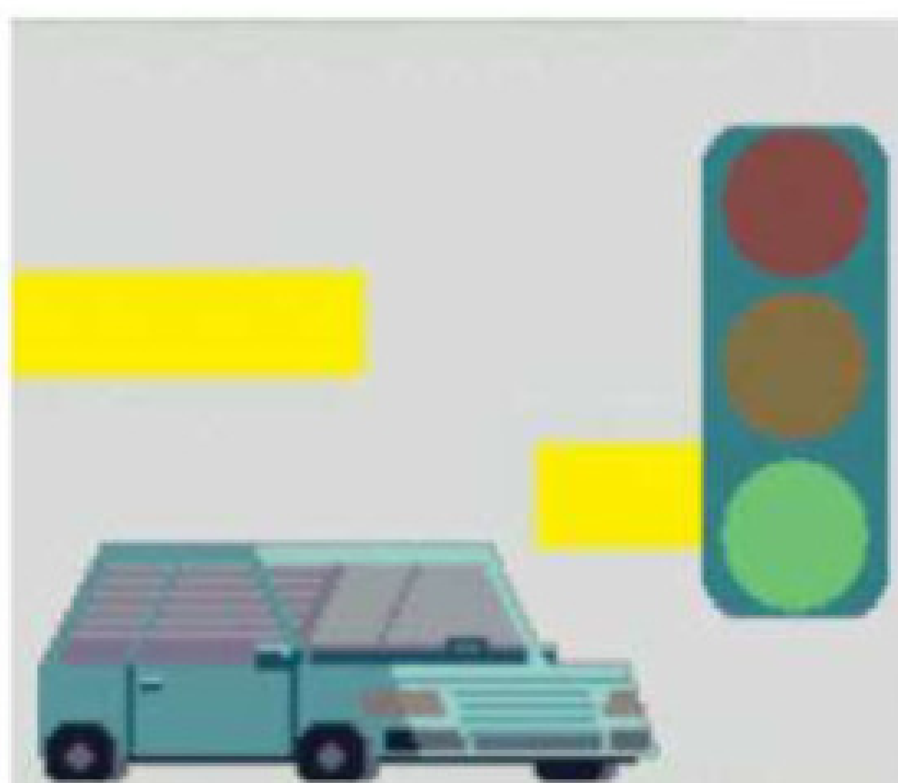


What have been your favourite games you've made, or ones that you found most interesting to make?
I don't know! It keeps changing, because there are some that have brought me a lot of joy just because they're funny. I made a game about farting, and that's funny, and it made me very happy that week to make a dumb game about farting. So that was, like, one of my favourite ones to make but I don't know what I would do with it beyond that, whereas there have been some that have just been really interesting from a design perspective.

Are you going to be taking a break between the end of your game a week schedule and your next project?
Yeah. I think my big thing is I need a break from the constant pushing myself to create something, and I also need to do contract work for a little bit because obviously none of these have been very commercially viable. I haven't been doing this as a commercially viable thing, and I've been fortunate enough that I've been in a position where I can dedicate a lot of time to this and do contract work here and there throughout the year to, sort of, supplement that.

But I'm at a point now where I need to do a bit of contract work so I can financially support myself through the next phase of this, and then also I sort of relish in the idea of working on a project that I have creative input to but not all the creative input design decisions.

So I've been in talks with a few people to work on some projects. I'm planning on taking basically the rest of the year, probably the beginning of next year, working on something else. But for the most part I'll be dedicating some of my time to other projects and just sort of giving my brain a break for a little bit would be nice! 





TRAIN JAM?

Often the best catalyst for creativity is being confined in one place until the job is done. But sometimes a train will do…





Above Game Jams are becoming incredible hotbeds for new game ideas.

■ Wallick also sets up game jams to help aspiring developers get the flashes of experience she's earned herself through working on smaller projects. These events are similar to other game jams around the industry, albeit with a key difference… you make a game over the time it takes a train to travel through middle America. "Train Jam is going to be the end of February 2015," she explains. "So far we have Sony, Unity, YoYo Games and Karma, which is a WiFi device company (because there's no WiFi on the train, so they're donating a few hotspot devices for us to be able to have WiFi).

"I have 100 tickets this year, I'm able to offset the ticket prices a little bit to make it a little bit more affordable for people to attend it. I can provide food, I can provide notebooks and pencils and coffee – lots and lots of coffee – for people. So I'm really excited, because since it was so well received last year it allowed me to do so much more with it this year."

Visit trainjam.com for more details on the event.



Above As this train speeds across the States, developers finalise their games.

EIDOS MONTREAL HAS REVEALED ITS BRAND NEW DAWN ENGINE FOR BUILDING DEUS EX UNIVERSE

> "From the very beginning, we've had a TV series writer: someone that was used to writing overarching scripts and breaking them down"
> Jean-Maxime Moris, creative director

Five Things About
Life Is Strange

Undo mistakes and try again – what a phenomenal mechanic that would be in real life. That's the premise of Life Is Strange, an episodic coming-of-age tale with time-bending mechanics. We caught up with creative director Jean-Maxime Moris to discuss what Dontnod's newest adventure is all about…

1 It's a game about duality…

"The story that we're telling is a reunion of the two main characters – Max and Chloe – who are trying to uncover a mystery together. But there's a bigger meaning behind it – you can make choices, come back, and make choices again to see how it pans out. Those choices become greater and greater in importance, and that's all actually a metaphor for becoming an adult: it's a coming of age story. We needed a character that was on the brink of becoming an adult to pull that off – so Max is 18. And we needed another character to draw her more towards the darker side because she's experienced more in life – that's Chloe."

2 Its unique art direction is partly inspired by indie cinema…

"There will be five episodes total, and you have very different and varied environments to explore; some will be indoors, others will be outdoors, and in terms of general look and feel, some will be more comforting and you'll be at ease immediately whilst others (where you have to uncover some uncomfortable truths) will be… well, they'll fit that Yin and Yang dichotomy versus the 'nicer' areas."

3 It's attempting to redefine the episodic adventure game…

"We're obviously big fans of Telltale – if they hadn't paved the way, we wouldn't be here. We respect their work a lot. People have bought into the ideas of the 'modern adventure game' – adventure games now sound boring; they've been done. We're moving forward with the rewind mechanic and the themes we're exploring. I hope we can better the genre and improve the formula. That said, I don't want to sound too sure of myself! [laughter] That's just what we're hoping for."

4 It uses the theory behind TV narratives to inform its game design…

"From the very beginning, we've had a TV series writer: someone that was used to writing overarching scripts and breaking them down. So we've got experience with teasing, throwbacks to previous events, character structure and development… all of this has been in our minds since its inception. It's something we've paid a lot of attention to – it wasn't just doing a whole script like we did for *Remember Me* and then just chopping it down into five pieces."

5 It wants to do something new with publisher Square Enix…

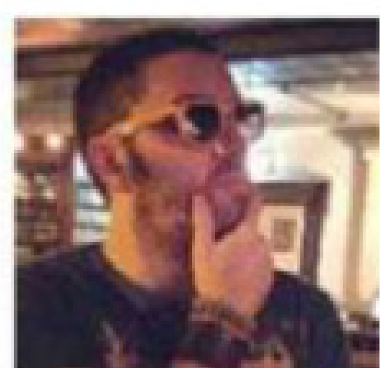
"After launching a triple-A game, we looked at the state of the market, and the sales of *Remember Me*, and after two or three weeks we decided we'd make an episodic game – it fit the desires of our team and the mechanics we had in mind. We could see publishers – and Square Enix, most of all – buying into the idea of doing something fresh: a new IP that also benefits from the new market dynamic that demonstrates popularity in a new segment, in the episodic content space."

eSports 101

Your Guide to Pro Gaming



The Glorious PC Gaming Master Race



As we all know, console gamers aren't really gamers at all. Those who are clever enough to be PC gamers (The Glorious Master Race) not only dominate the gaming world but when they do occasionally go outside, they glisten like glorious Italian marble and when they touch you, the only sensible thing to do is put it on your CV. All PC gamers are instantly tech geniuses, while console gamers can't even change a light bulb.

For those of you that have decided to keep reading this column – perhaps to find out more information about me so you can track me down – I, of course, do not agree with these statements at all. Before you get the pitch forks out and start rabble-rousing, my intention here is to poke fun at a debate that has raged for over a decade and one that will no doubt run until the end of time. But here's the rub, it's a completely pointless debate. There is no such thing as a "Master race" and we all know what happened to the last guy who believed in one of those.

Through my entire gaming life I have had the luxury of swapping back and forth between numerous PC formats and consoles. From my Atari 2600 (home of the original *Mouse Trap*) to my first experience of *Odd Job Eddie* on the Spectrum 128k all the way to modern day consoles and PCs. Not only have I moved from machine to console and back again without a care I have also enjoyed every single minute of it, as every gaming platform has something different to offer. Do PC games on top end machines look better? Yes. Can PCs ever rival the ease of use of a console? No. Do PCs rival the fun of playing sports games on the sofa with your mates? No. Do consoles offer as much choice as their PC counterparts? No. Yes, no, yes, no… You get the idea.

> Having come from a PC eSports background with QuakeWorld, I was long of the mindset that console eSports were clearly inferior

Recently, this discussion has taken a different turn as it has entered the eSports world, albeit with a twist. On one side, we have the PC eSports players from the various games who for once are united in their view that PC eSports take a higher level of skill. On the other side, you have the console gamers who are not actually claiming that they are *more* skilful but rather that they deserve to be recognised as being *just as* skilful.

Having come from a PC eSports background with QuakeWorld, I was long of the mindset that console eSports were clearly inferior. After all, how is it possible to be as accurate with a gamepad as you can be with a mouse? This was a view I held for a long time and often used my gamepad argument as my main reference point. However, as I got more and more involved with console eSports I quickly realised that just like their counterparts in the PC industry the top pro gamers could do things that mere mortals could only dream of.

Luckily I'm quite clear now: it doesn't matter if you have a mouse or a gamepad in your hands. If you are good enough to be among the best players in the world at any game on any format then you are truly a pro gamer.



Console eSports don't require any bulky desks!

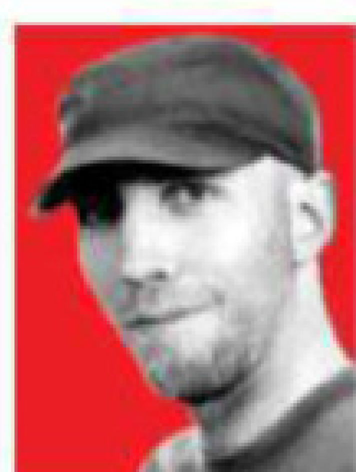
Paul Kent has over 16 years experience in the industry and is currently eSports director at the UK's leading eSports company Gfinity

KONGETSU

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPORTING



An import-friendly future? Not on Nintendo's watch...



As someone who grew up working weekends while at school just to blow an entire month's income at once on a single overpriced N64 import (I paid over £80 to get *Pokémon Snap* early, and I regret nothing), I've got a lot of love for import culture. There's just something about knowing that you're among the first to play a big new release and while global launches and localisation talent scouts have led to a steep drop-off in the number of games actually worth importing in recent years, it's something I don't believe should be actively blocked as it is by Nintendo.

Come on, guys... Sony made a point of releasing PS3, PSP, Vita and PS4 as completely region-free consoles, while region restrictions on 360 games were apparently left to the discretion of publishers and developers, hence why many smaller single-territory releases were free to run on any system. In fact, in this digital future, it's easier than ever to import games on PS4 and Xbox One – simply sign into the console store on an account from another country and it's like walking into a virtual game shop across the pond. Despite all this, Nintendo continues to stubbornly spite would-be importers and from software-side updates to prevent GameCube and Wii boot discs from allowing import games to be played to firmware updates today that pull the same stunt whenever an exciting exploit is found, it remains the only platform holder that continues to stonewall importing.

I'm gutted that Nintendo didn't take the golden opportunity of releasing revised 3DS hardware to correct this, as it would have been perfect. As much as I might not be willing to buy a Japanese 3DS to play a handful of interesting imports, would I jack in my UK XL for a new region-free model? In a heartbeat. And I'm sure I'm not alone. It's a feature people really do want these days, as freedom is key. If I'm on holiday in Japan and want to buy a CD, it'll work back home. If I buy a DVD or Blu-ray, I can make it work back home. And if I buy a PS4 or Vita game, I can play it on the way home. It's a restriction that hurts rather than helps Nintendo these days and I sincerely hope we see the back of it some day soon.

> It's a restriction that hurts rather than helps Nintendo these days and I sincerely hope we see the back of it some day soon.

And it might be on the cards, too. Speaking to investors in October, Iwata mentioned that region-free capabilities, particularly on handhelds, can be of benefit to both publisher and consumer. Locking is a hangover from a time when games could release in Japan and the West up to several years apart, and at that time it made sense to protect the domestic release by blocking imports. But today, with time frames tightened up and little reason to fear players wanting to pay over the odds just to have a game a few hours early, it's an anachronism that just serves to highlight just how backwards Nintendo is in some ways, even going some way to counteract many of its more forward-thinking products and initiatives. It's all about giving the consumer choice at the end of the day, and that's one side of the modern gaming business Nintendo still really doesn't seem to understand.

Luke Albigés is Deputy Editor of **Play** magazine and has spent thousands of pounds on imported games, most of which will never see light of day in the West



● Atlus once took a punt on this bonkers series – it localised and released the third game as *Kenka Bancho: Badass Rumble* on PSP – but aside from that, the tough guy brawler hasn't had a chance to square up to Western players. It's a shame too, because while this new 3DS game is just around the corner, these games are surprisingly smart for old-school fighters where you can dress your hero up as a banana.



Does Anyone Actually Care About Remakes?

Gaming remakes are in vogue right now – whether they're simple HD collections that upscale the source material or fully-fledged remakes that developers pour hours upon hours into, it seems our thirst for old games on new platforms is almost unquenchable. But do the likes of *Pokémon Omega Ruby/Alpha Sapphire* offer value for money? Are next-gen re-releases like *Dark Souls II* giving players what they want, or are they just cynical cash grabs?

Loved the remastered *Tomb Raider* game on the PS4 and the *Metro Redux* games collection, too. A great game with upgraded graphics and frame-rate, if possible, still will be great or maybe even bit better [than the original]
Ben Seinstra, Facebook

It depends on the game really. I'm not a fan of this trend of barebones last-gen remasters, but sixth generation stuff is fine. While the original is decent enough, I'd really love to see an official release here of *Final Fantasy XII Zodiac International* (which improves practically everything about that game) upscaled as some sort of package deal with another game.
Darragh Hendrix, Facebook

I would honestly prefer a full remake similar to *Resident Evil* on the GameCube. It felt like you were playing a completely different game, which justified buying it again if you already played it on the PlayStation. If companies are simply just going to bump up the resolution, at least follow the model of the PS2 HD Collections and put three games on the one disc.
Robert Warnes, Facebook

I'd like to see 'making of documentaries', in-game commentary. And maybe something like a god-mode so you can enjoy it without the constant fear of dying. I want to enjoy the enhanced graphical effects and atmosphere.
@alexpletives, Twitter

As long as the gameplay is significantly improved - like *Wind Waker* on the Wii U - then it's worth it. Gorgeous graphics helped, too.
@raindog1970, Twitter

Akin to Blu-ray/DVD releases of classic movies, features of remade games should include: making ofs, creator commentaries, etc.
@Organic_Shadow, Twitter

I like them if they aren't released too soon [after the originals] and offer more content: graphical upgrades etc, at a fair price, like *Halo: Anniversary* and *Metal Gear Solid HD Collection.*
@feedonatreefrog, Twitter

I have no issue with them, if they can be made to look better, and offer a full experience with all DLC, it's all good for me.
@CockneyCharmer, Twitter

“Journey was the first game that made me think about the meaning of life, and the meaning of our existence on this planet”

TYMON SMEKTAŁA, TECHLAND, PRODUCER



WHY I ♥...

JOURNEY

TYMON SMEKTAŁA, TECHLAND, PRODUCER

"The strongest emotional memory I have connected to a game is Journey on the PS3. It was the first game that made me think about the meaning of life, and the meaning of our existence on this planet. I never felt anything like I felt when I finished that game from a TV screen connected to a home console before – Journey gave me that experience. I keep that title in the highest esteem and in the highest regard because of that."

2015 LEVELS UP

THE DIVISION

EVOLVE

BLOODBORNE

FINAL FANTASY XV

UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

HALO 5: GUARDIANS



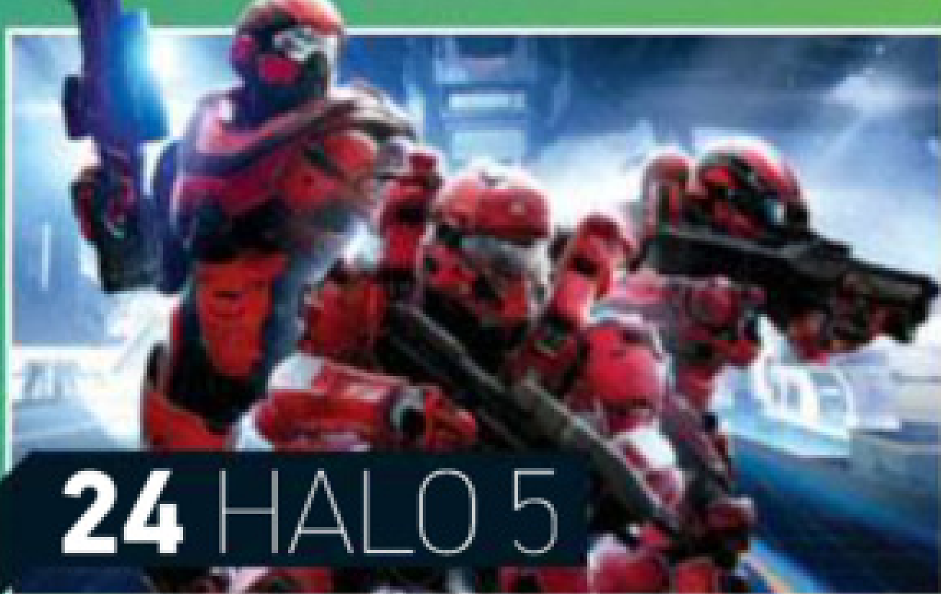
49 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA



67 HELLBLADE



50 FFXV



24 HALO 5



41 RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER



44 EVOLVE



56 METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN



38 BLOODBORNE



35 VR TECH



HALO 5 GUARDIANS

PlayStation might have moved itself into the limelight with its Street Fighter exclusivity, The Order: 1886's promising cinematic feel, a slew of JRPGs and, of course Uncharted 4, but Microsoft still has one ace up its sleeve: Halo, the publisher's unmovable and monolithic flagship



343 is doubling down on the sports side of *Halo* multiplayer with this beta test, looking to get the attention of pro gamers.

We're getting back to core *Halo* values. The beta is kicking off and as fans around the world are discovering, 343 has clearly learned a thing or two from working diligently on *The Master Chief Collection*'s remastered maps. This is tight, frantic, evenly balanced FPS action the way that Bungie perfected it. Ever since *Halo: Combat Evolved* launched to a rapturous reception in 2001, Bungie's seminal franchise has carried the Xbox platform and it needs some of that old magic back again.

It's no secret that the Xbox One has been over-shadowed by the PS4 up until now, but with 343 Industries keeping the pilot light on with *Halo: The Master Chief Collection*, we could very well see the status quo reverse in 2015, with *Halo 5* leading the way – Master Chief himself could be that last Spartan standing in the pass, giving everything to try and push forward and gain ground for Microsoft.

Halo has always been sold on its multiplayer – while the series has a solid narrative spine, fleshed out with religiously synchronic enemies and a universe as rich and complex as anything you'd find in an Iain M. Banks novel, *Halo* has always lead with its PvP. It's

> "343 Industries has been incredibly clear that Halo 5's direction has been influenced by eSports"

a cartoon version of the *Call of Duty*s and *Battlefield*s that permeate the industry – a low-gravity, elbow-smacking, rapid-firing sci-fi romp through maps you'd struggle to fit into any other game. *Halo* is a go-to game for good competition. Some of the most skilled shooters in the world gravitate to its servers to test themselves – and their rivals – inside a game that's been crafted specifically for intense player-on-player combat. It's gladiatorial, fuelled by (virtual) blood.

343 Industries has been incredibly clear that *Halo 5*'s direction has been influenced by eSports, and from the beta gameplay we've seen, that's the most obvious change. Long-term fans of the series can rest assured – this renewed focus on condensed







Locke and Load

What more do we know about Agent Locke?

■ While *Halo 5* will continue the adventures of Master Chief, he wont be the only playable character in the game. Sharing the stage with the walking tank we all know and love is Agent Locke – a Spartan sent by the UNSC to track down a rogue Chief and bring him back to the governing organisation to stand trial for his crimes (read: going AWOL to save Cortana).

"[When *Halo 5* comes out], you're basically going to be playing a game with me as the primary character," explains Mike Colter, the actor voicing Locke. "I'll have some cool weaponry, and some cool abilities, because by that time I'll be a Spartan IV."

It also looks like Locke will be accompanied by a crew of rainbow-visored Spartan allies – something we think points firmly towards the inclusion of some sort of Firefight or Spartan Ops mode? We'll have to wait and see...





■ Playing through *The Master Chief Collection* is the perfect lead-in for the events of *Halo 5: Guardians*.



competition means the multiplayer looks like it did back in the *Halo 2* and *3* days, before the main experience became diluted with effective but ultimately weighty gimmicks. *Guardians* is an attempt at 343 going back to Bungie's roots.

This is obvious in the maps that 343 has made available in the beta – most notably in 'Truth', *Halo 5*'s take on the 'Midship' map that was added into *Halo 3*'s online modes with the *ODST* expansion. There are platforms and slopes that lead to a variety of vantage points where 343 have craftily scattered a plethora of DMRs and Battle Rifles, so there will always be an entrenched firefight on the go. For anyone that's been scratching their *Halo* itch with *Destiny* over the last few months, you'll breathe a sigh of relief when you begin mashing X to respawn, and notice you're immediately thrown back into the action. *Guardians* is fast and frantic – for those skilled enough to stay alive in the bottlenecks, multikill medals stack up, while those who prefer to run and gun wont get frustrated with punishing respawn times.

It's worth noting that 'Truth' also has very few overhead barriers and seems to be constructed by a claustrophobe – no matter where you are, you're never backed into a corner. This results in a flurry of »

Beta Breakdown

Everything that's new to the interface for the Halo 5 beta

1 Reticule real estate

In typical *Halo* style, and to our relief, the central reticule is still small and minimalist. And there will always be one on-screen, even when you're not zooming in.

2 Radar watching

The *Halo* radar looks as simple as it ever was, but with a few slight updates: the radial markings look divided by ten feet per division, aiding spacial awareness and orientation.

3 Some old Bungie flavour

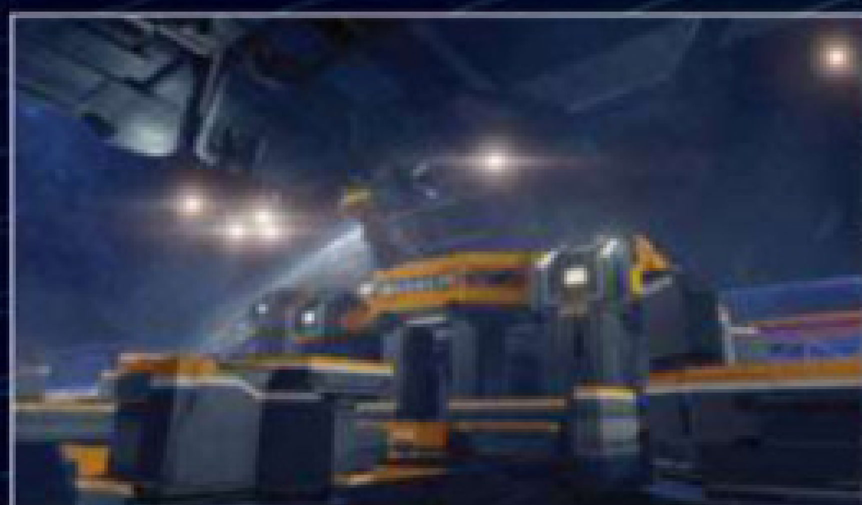
Game modes make a return, and the UI looks incredibly similar to what we've been looking at in *Destiny* for the last four months… which is for the best, clearly.

4 Stocking up on grenades

You can still carry more than one set of grenades, despite the stickies not being shown here. Bring on the Death From The Grave medals! We're going to explode *everyone*.

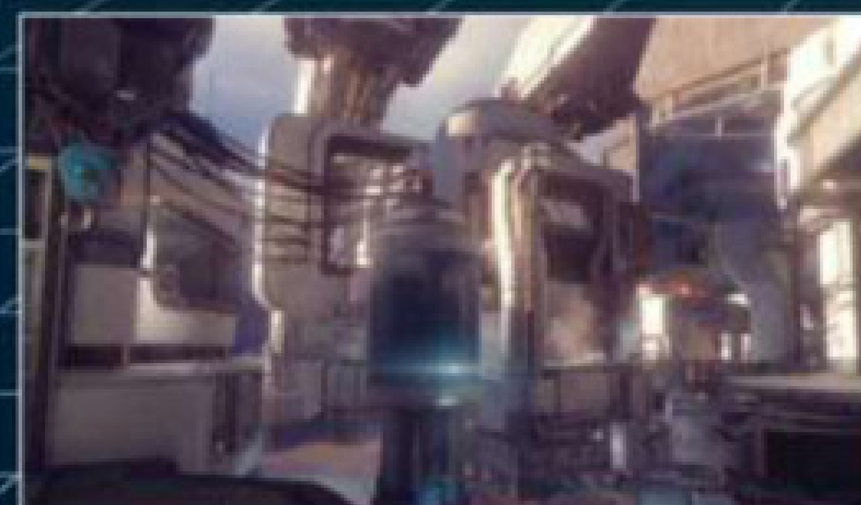
5 Opening up line of sight

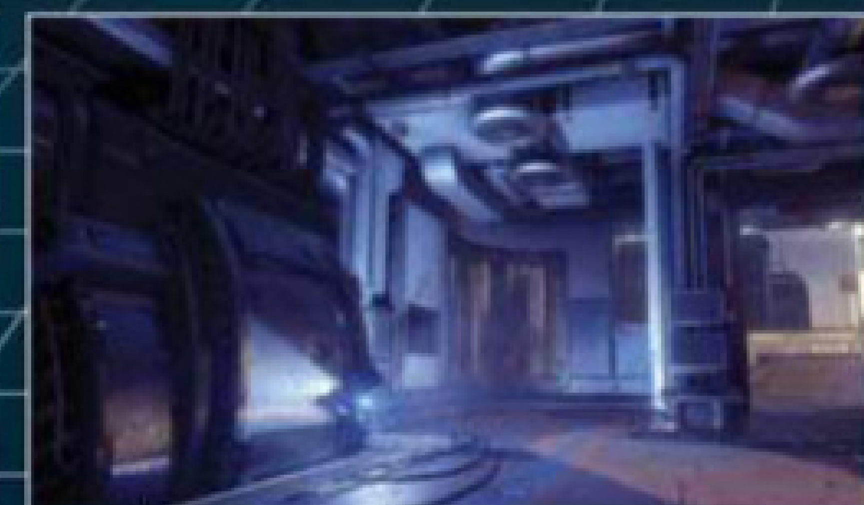
We've noticed the sightlines in *Halo 5*'s maps offer more visibility than usual – perhaps to offset how descoping snipers will give camping players a disadvantage?





This is one of *Halo 5*'s more angular battle grounds with plenty of hiding spots and verticality.





Graphically, *Halo 5* already looks like its delivering on the promise of 60fps and great lighting.



fistfights breaking out in the centre of the map as the more cautious players duke it out over range with their precision weapon of choice. When you're stuck in the Crucible mid-ground, you begin to realise how authentic a *Halo* experience *Guardians* is offering: a grenade (with that lovely metallic chink *Halo*'s always done so well) rolls in beside you, so you use your Slide ability to dodge out of harm's way... but then an enemy Spartan grabs you from behind and begins the assassination animation before a headshot from a teammate across the map stops him in his tracks. You breath, pause, take stock of your surroundings, and Thruster Pack away, ready to do it all again.

You might decide you need to head to higher ground to get a better view of the battle, or perhaps you decide you need to update your loadout. If that's the case, you'll be pleased to learn that Ordnance Drops – which were introduced in *Halo 4* to mimic the care packages of *Call Of Duty* – have been thrown out as quickly as they were brought in. We're behind the decision to drop the Ordnance: it always seemed to hem in the combat, restrict team movement and forced play to travel around the map, nomadic, never really settling into a rhythm or allowing teams to dominate one chokehold or another.

Instead, 343 has gone back to leaving weapons dotted around the map – to achieve victory in *Halo 5*, you'll have to learn the spawn locations and time your life (or death...) *just right*, so you can go grab that elusive sword or rocket launcher at a moment's notice and rain righteous death upon your foes. To aid player orientation and to make the whole game just that little more eSports friendly, 343 is introducing audio cues: little aural beats that Spartans will emit upon death, letting you know what they died of, so you don't have to keep half an eye on the in-game ticker at all times.

Your de facto leader gets taken out with a headshot from a sniper, say, and the Spartan will call out where the bullet came from. A shotgun spawns in that blood gulch of an underpass somewhere mid-level – a Spartan will announce that, too. It's perhaps the biggest eSports influence the game has seen, yet it's subtle – inevitably stemming from the team of pro players 343 hired to help development of *Halo 5*. Seeing it in action, we noticed how much it speeds up the combat and team liaison – the particularly keen of hearing will always be the first on the ordnance.

To balance out the quickened pace of the game, 343 has introduced iron sights into the game – albeit going under the 'Smart Scope' moniker as to keep that technologically-focused *Halo* flavour. Any FPS devotee knows how much of a game-changer this can be, but in a game like *Halo* the introduction of scopes for *every* weapon is revolutionary. Even if you're equipped with a Gravity Hammer or an Energy Sword, you can now bring up a weapons-orientated view, thanks (we assume) to your modified Spartan helmets. For the sake of clarity, we ought to emphasize that the Smart Scope is cosmetic only and won't affect the behaviour of your weapons, but in terms of orientation and predicting spread, the Scope is invaluable.





This makes some *Halo* weapons far more valid than they used to be. The Assault Rifle, which we've only really ever used for suppression and as a spray-and-pay backup plan when everything else goes wrong, is now more tactile – there was little point in using it before, because the spread of your bullets was less effective at short range than, say, a shotgun. But now – with a little guidance – the auto rifles are legitimate mid-range weapons, filling a gap in the *Halo* armoury that's been begging for some more action since *Reach* introduced the Designated Marksman Rifle.

> "If you're aiming down sights and take any damage, you'll be descoped for a brief period"

But that potentially causes a problem when you look at it alongside *Halo*'s *other* reintroduction: descoping. If you're aiming down sights, and take *any* damage, you'll be descoped for a brief period, with a slight delay to any trigger presses during the process. It's a brutally punishing form of suppression, and it's designed to keep the fast pace of *Halo* in play – 343 doesn't want you to get bogged down in gruelling stalemates: it wants you to fire from the hip, keep your wits up, and *play*.

Snipers have always been a central part of the *Halo* multiplayer experience (for better or worse...), but now they're firmly on the back foot: campers will have to be stealthier than ever if they want to get their potshots in without alerting enemy Spartans to their position. One stray shot can give away your position and allow troops to flank you, peppering you with an odd bullet here or there to keep you out of action until they're close enough to kill.

So you'll need escape options. That's where abilities come in – although they're not really the abilities you'll recognize from *Halo: Reach* or *Halo 4* anymore. Rather than that, every player starts the game on an equal footing (the way *Halo* should be), levelling the playing field. Each player now has access to a series of six



The Pro Gamer Verdict

Not being pro gamers, we aren't quite the most qualified people in the world to talk about the impact *Halo 5* will have on the competitive multiplayer FPS scene – after all, we've never even come close to gaining Champion status in said genre. Scott Lussier, eSports admin at HiRez Studios has, though. He's a former National *Halo 2* champion (NA) who retired in 2008 to offer consultancy and commentary on other eSports games. Lussier shared his thoughts on *Halo 5* with us…

What's the difference between Iron Sights and 'aiming down the sights', and what does that mean to *Halo*?

First and foremost, *Halo* is not Aim Down Sights. This is a common misconception, which the online community seems to accept because of the mob mentality. Aim Down Sights means that when you zoom in it is more accurate than shooting from the hip. That's not the case in *Halo 5*. All *Halo 5* is implementing is the new "Smart Scope." It's totally different than ADS. This won't affect gameplay in the slightest bit, because it's purely cosmetic. From the games I played, the shooting seemed to have very little auto aim, so obviously I'm a fan.

How did you react to the reintroduction of descoping?

Descope is what makes shooting in *Halo* difficult. The fact that it was ever taken out of the Halo Series (in *Halo 4*) is a complete disservice to the game. Descope is *Halo*, *Halo* is descope.

So are you a fan of the abilities we've seen in *Halo 5* so far?

It's about to be 2015. I repeat, it's about to be 2015. With that said, there is no way you can launch a futuristic shooter without sprint, so go ahead and put down your pitchforks. Sprint is here to stay.

Moving forward, there are a couple of abilities I don't fully agree with, but I don't think they're completely game-breaking. Ground Pound isn't an ability that I believe should be in *Halo*, as well as all the other Spartan abilities, but whatever. As long as they aren't game-breaking I really don't care what happens. The developers have to spice things up to appeal to new audiences.

343 is trying to appeal more to the eSports audience. Do you think this is heading in the right direction? Do you think it could ever be one of the bigger eSports names out there?

The Halo Championship Series is an amazing idea, but with the lack of tournament organisers in North America it is kind of scary. It's pretty clear at this point that 343 won't be working with MLG, who put up the serious prize pools that bring in the viewers. Regardless of this tiny obstacle, 343 supporting eSports is huge not only for the community but for eSports as a whole. The more people who want to watch competitive gaming the better. I will say I've heard nothing but good things from the ESL crew, so I'm excited to see what they will bring to the North America console scene. I welcome you with open arms.

What are your impressions of the maps revealed so far?

I don't know what any of these maps are [due to preparing for Smite Worlds], but I liked Midship [renamed in *Halo 5* as Truth]. Whatever that map is called. Can we stop changing the damn names of maps? Can we stick to calling it Midship? Dust 2 is still called Dust 2 after 15 years: we can call Midship Midship.



Descoping is coming back for Halo 5, making sniping a much more challenging task again.



Personalising your Spartan will remain a big part of stamping your identity on the game.

'Mobility' abilities – Stabilizer, Ground Pound, Clamber, Thruster Pack, Spartan Charge and Slide.

That means sprinting is no longer reserved for those that only want to get the drop on their enemies – everyone can do it. After being in *Halo: Reach* and *4*, sprinting actually *does* feel like a staple *Halo* mechanic now, and it plays into making the game as fast and relentless as it should be. Bear in mind that the new changes prevent your shield from recharging if you sprint, so, just like real life, running away from your problems will only ever be a temporary solution.

The various new Mobility abilities, though, are a double-edged sword: the Thruster Pack is a godsend, allowing you to zip to the side when under fire and slink away somewhere safer. This fluidity isn't mimicked elsewhere, though, thanks to Scramble. *Halo* doesn't need a small animation that lets you scramble up a wall – the beauty of the game's floaty physics has always been in mastering them, knowing the arcs of your jump and mastering the trajectory, knowing you can make it to that platform over there if you need to. Scrambling dampens that, and can occasionally stumble your movements with an animation we don't think *really* needs to be there. This is something that could prove quite contentious in the run up to the release of the game.

On the less evasive, more aggressive side of things, the Spartan Charge – a shoulder barge that can clear a corridor of enemies if you pull it off right – gets the balance right, and is probably the most Spartan thing

> "It's a product greater than the sum of its parts, ready for pro gamers to get their teeth into"

you can imagine: a full-bodied bull rush of Spartan momentum activated at top sprinting speed. The Ground Pound, though, feels very… not *Halo*. It's the Titan's Super move from *Destiny* diluted to a small area of effect, and it means less skilled players will be able to get kills from above without too much thought. While that's not bad in and of itself, it still makes us a little cautious – it could be argued it's adding rather than trimming fat that *Halo* doesn't need to line its meaty game with.

It's safe to say 343 has stripped back a lot of the bulk that weighed *Halo 4* down though, and reintroduced elements that made *Halo* games *truly* special in the first place (descoping and weapon spawns, specifically). The work 343 has been doing with eSports professionals shines through the game's already brilliantly shiny veneer, too – the small changes made to the UI, the audio and the HUD all knit together to form a product greater than the sum of its parts, ready for skilled pro players to get their teeth into.

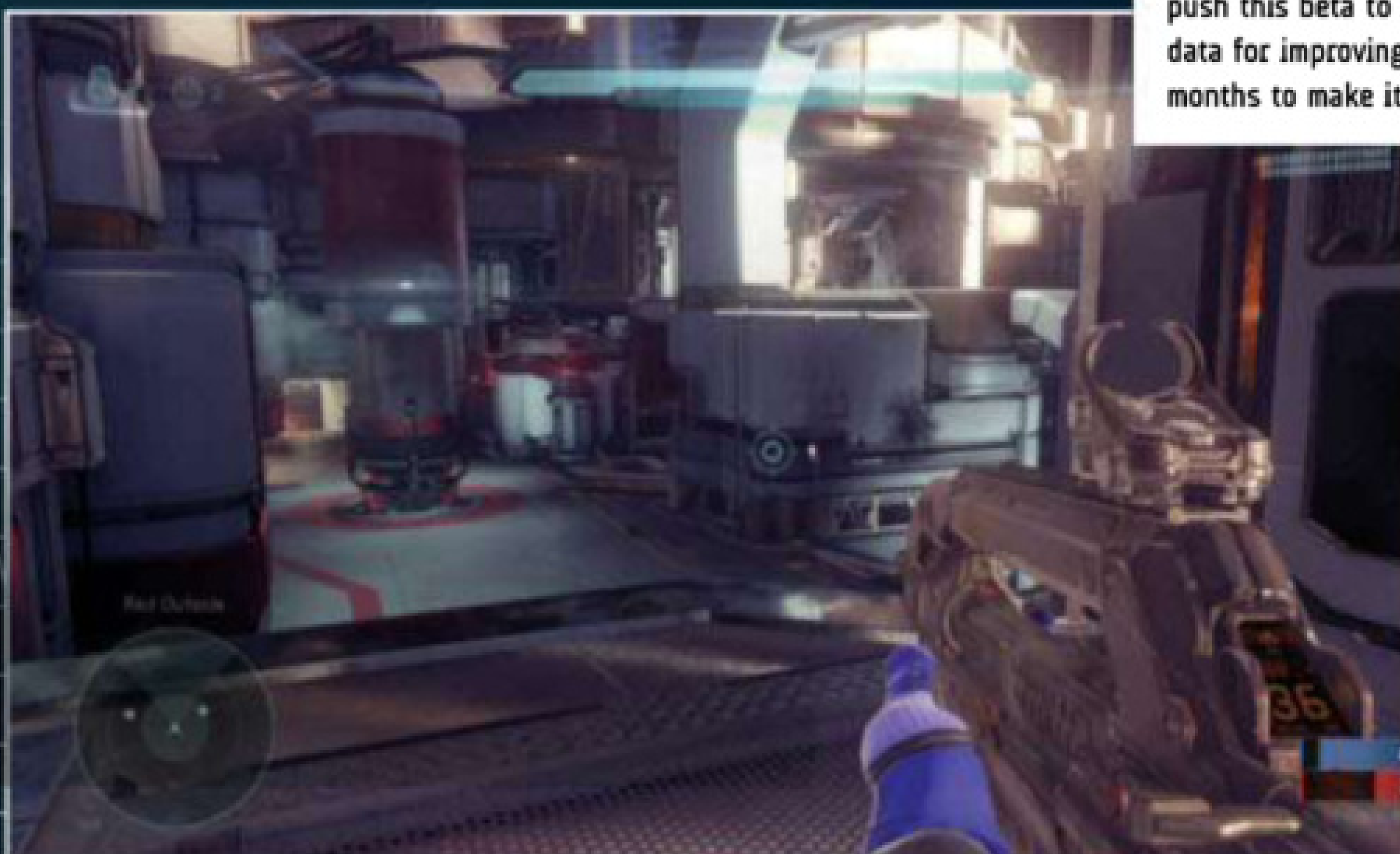
Yes, we're a little critical right now of some of the elements that 343 is introducing here, and yes, we've made a fair amount of *Destiny* references in the process but both of those things are actually compliments to what 343 has achieved with this *Halo* beta: it's at once familiar enough to be recognisable as a *Halo* game, but with enough new elements to make us *really* want to think about them, not to mention having traces of Bungie's DNA running through it. And when you're making a *Halo* game, what more could you want than that?







After some of the online connection and matchmaking issues of *The Master Chief Collection*, 343 is going to want to push this beta to its limits to get usable data for improving the game. It still has months to make it right though.





JUST CAUSE 3

BECAUSE WHY NOT?

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin:** Sweden **Publisher:** Square Enix **Developer:** Avalanche Studios **Release:** Q4 2015 **Players:** 1

LET'S PUT IT on the line here: *Just Cause* as a franchise is a happy accident. No one expected it to garner as much appeal as it did; it was rough around the edges, the story was nonsense and that massive landmass was very sparsely populated. But none of that mattered because it was a sandbox of chaos, a place to build things up for that pure, cathartic passion of knocking them back down. It encapsulates what is *right* with open-world games, simply by giving you the tools to enjoy the environment however you please. And so it is that news of another *Just Cause* game is likely a reason to rejoice for gamers across the world. And before you ask – yes, the grappling hook is coming back.

Luckily it seems Avalanche Studios is acutely aware of both the boons and the booms of its key franchise, admitting that the latest entry will capture everything that *Just Cause 2* did right while improving, polishing and enhancing the things it didn't. The addition of a wingsuit, for example, combined with the grappling hook makes for a truly compulsive way to navigate the world; the desire here, apparently, is to make players feel comfortable in the air. That's an important phrase for the game, in fact, since verticality of gameplay is due to take centre stage with this new title. It was where players felt most empowered previously, after all, so it's only right that this remains the core part of *Just Cause 3*.

But perhaps the most tantalising prospect is one of destruction. While Avalanche Studios promises a much greater depth and density to its Mediterranean location – that means more trees, more buildings and even underground caverns to explore – it is also giving you the means to destroy it all, too. Destruction physics on the scale of *Red Faction: Guerrilla* have been suggested, allowing you to decimate structures as vast as bridges and huge radar antennae. It's telling that Avalanche name-dropped the latest generation of consoles and their video capture capabilities as a factor that motivates the team, proving if proof were needed that this will be a playground that is as rewarding as your imagination – the ease with which you can now boast about the exceptional stunts, tricks and destruction that you'll create will make *Just Cause 3* doubly fulfilling.

That's not to say there won't be a greater sense of place to the game's proceedings, however. Despite describing Rico as little more than a 'tool' for your own enjoyment, Avalanche is still driven to give him a sense of reason within the world. Now a few years older than his *Just Cause 2* equivalent, Rico is returning to fictional Mediterranean island Medici, his childhood home, and though it seems this will act as little more than a flimsy, lollipop stick brace to hold the story together we are promised a little more insight into who Rico is as a person. Though it is about time we were presented with a little more depth of character in the *Just Cause* series, this might have alarm bells ringing – Avalanche isn't exactly a proven commodity in this particular regard. All the same the developer has reiterated that it isn't forgetting what made the franchise what it is.

In truth there isn't really all that much that needs to be done to the formula to make *Just Cause 3* a success, and it certainly sounds like Avalanche Studios is making the right noises in this regard. 'More, but better' is the attitude to take away from this new entry to the franchise so far and it's hard to see any fault in that. Quality is a difficult ingredient to measure, but hopefully the love of *JC2* has given Avalanche the confidence – and by virtue the backing of Square Enix – to make this sequel an undeniable classic.

"THE ADDITION OF A WINGSUIT, COMBINED WITH THE GRAPPLING HOOK MAKES FOR A COMPULSIVE WAY TO NAVIGATE THE WORLD"







Above: Rico's grappling hook played a large part in *Just Cause 2*, so naturally it'll return. Tethering to explosive canisters, vehicles to one another or even human enemies to passing helicopters will likely remain as entertaining as it ever was.

SAND, SEA AND SLINGSHOTS

■ *Just Cause* has always been about gorgeous, expansive landscapes. Avalanche Studios has claimed Monaco as its core inspiration for *JC3*, with nods to the dusty, harsh landscapes of Greece, Northern Africa and Albania as a patchwork of real-world themes that make up the quilt of fictional Mediterranean island Medici. Though the size of the island is said to be mostly comparable to *Just Cause 2*'s 400km, the potential visual disparity between emerald oceans and stony mountains will make for a compelling environment to explore.

■ Above: While the power of the new generation of consoles will obviously enable a greater beauty to the Mediterranean setting, its the ease of development that should make *Just Cause 3* a much more polished place to play in. Left: Combine the wingsuit with a grappling hook and Rico essentially becomes Batman. That's something to consider as you're tying explosives to a fighter plane and colliding it into an enemy base.





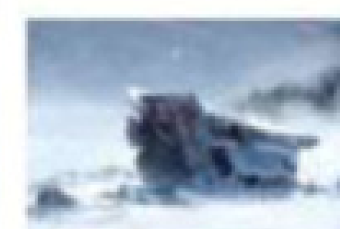
2015 LEVELS UP

5 THINGS STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT



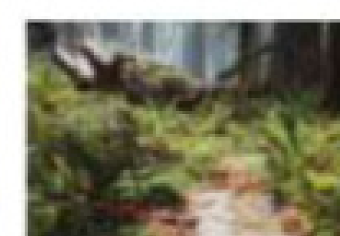
1. DICE'S ROLL

■ *Battlefield* developer DICE has claimed that *Battlefront* will be its "interpretation" of what the franchise is. Don't get too worried, however, since Conquest mode of *Battlefield* is largely similar to that of *Battlefront*'s anyway. It'll be interesting to see if it remains third-person, however, or if it'll be switched to first-person to make the most of DICE's expertise.



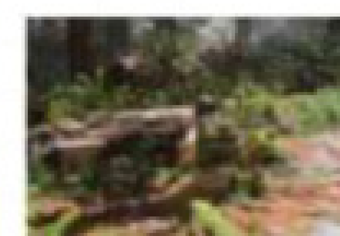
2. FROST-BITTEN

■ The Frostbite 3 engine will, of course, be on hand to make *Battlefront 3* look glorious. DICE has even visited locations such as Redwood National park – where the original location for Endor was filmed – to get a perfect replica for the environments we'll be battling in. Perhaps now we'll get to experience the Speeder bike chase for ourselves.



3. A NEW HOPE

■ *Battlefront* will release only on PC, PS4 and Xbox One in 2015, giving DICE technical freedom – rather than having to make concessions for the last generation. This should mean a technically robust game – it'll have to be after *Battlefield 4* – and 64 players or more online combat. That sensation of chaotic war will be core to the game.



4. RIDE WITH ME

■ We've already seen references to the AT-AT, Speeder bikes and the T-47 snowspeeders, so expect to see these vehicles featured heavily in the game. Vehicle combat has been a series staple since its inception, too, so we're looking forward to grand-scale galactic space battles as much as planet-side tanks and artillery combat.



5. EPISODE VII

■ It was revealed that *Battlefront* will be released to tie in with the *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*. What that means for the story of the game – or, indeed, the film – we don't yet know, but since we've seen footage of old, recognisable locations being developed, it's unlikely the two are too symbiotic.



UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

DRAKE'S QUEST FOR BOOTY CONTINUES…

Format: PS4 **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Naughty Dog **Release:** Q4 2015 **Players:** 1

DRAKE STANDS ATOP a cliff edge, waves crash and break against the rocks below him. We can see his hair and shirt ruffle in the breeze, and Drake begins to effortlessly move into a network of caves half-disguised by the shore's jutting rocks. The camera pans round as Drake mutters "Where to next?" to himself, and we see each word perfectly formed by his face and lips. This is all in-engine, this is all during gameplay.

We were dubious about Naughty Dog's promises to deliver after the E3 reveal of the studio's newest action adventure, but now that we've seen the game in action, we're relieved. Granted, it isn't as flawless as the trailer might have lead us to believe, but it's still one of the best looking games we've seen on the PS4, running at an easy 30fps in true 1080p resolution. It helps that the game can keep up with the PS4, even during the action heavy scenes – and in true *Uncharted* fashion, there's a lot of those queued up for you to climb, shoot and scuff your way through.

Traversal itself is one of the most noticeable improvements we've seen since the PS3's *Uncharted 3*. The motion capturing seems more refined, and dynamic shadows cast by Drake's flashlight make the cave system seem more realistic (something you can put down to the PS4's improved RAM: it has access to more detailed, lengthier animations and can draw on them without memory being sacrificed elsewhere).

Naughty Dog's work on *The Last Of Us* has clearly influenced the design of *Uncharted 4*, too. The level design seems far more open, and the enemies you encounter seem to operate in more of a pack than previous games, and while the AI still feels a little lackluster compared to what other action-adventure games can offer, their placement and response to the levels they're in makes up for their inhibited behaviour.

The game's story seems to revolve around Drake – played by Nolan North – hunting down pirate treasure, a quest likely to take him all around the world. Spurred on by a 'brother' (we're not sure whether that's a blood-tie 'brother' or street-lingo 'brother') played by Troy Baker, you have to give it to Naughty Dog: it knows how to tell great stories and get great actors to communicate them.



Drake himself apparently has over 800 facial animations this time around – we're not even sure we have that many. Into the uncanny valley we go…



The traversal and exploration looks a bit slicker than it did in *Uncharted 3*, and that's likely because the animations are a lot smoother.



VR IN 2015

THE YEAR VIRTUAL REALITY TAKES OFF

Manufacturer: Google, Oculus, Sony
Compatibility: PC, PS4 **Release:** 2015



WE'VE HEARD SO much about virtual reality over the last couple of years it's hard to remember that – technically speaking – it's not actually available as a product just yet. All the noise surrounding Facebook's acquisition of Oculus, the maturity of Google Glass and even Sony's terribly kept secret in Morpheus is a considerable amount when you realise that the general populace can't actually get their hands on any of these devices yet. But that's about to change; 2015 is the year of VR. Oculus Rift – and its wads of Facebook cash – will likely be ready to release the set next year, and so Sony will want to quickly follow suit to ride the wave with it. Valve, too, is planning to get involved with VR properly next year.

It's the games that matter, of course, and unlike the Virtual Boy of yesteryear it actually seems like developers have some interest in VR this time around. *EVE: Valkyrie* is the big name that's being thrown around, but there's also *Star Citizen* and *Elite: Dangerous* should you want to virtually take part in entire galaxies. The latter, in fact, is working alongside Oculus right now, and has been built with the VR mode in mind. The intricate details of being sat inside your cockpit is something that matches the engrossing play style of virtual reality exceptionally well – whether it's sensations ranging from peering out at the vast emptiness in front of you or glancing down at your holographic display inside the ship notifying you of an incoming message from a nearby commanding vessel. It's a sense of visual tactility that just *works* in this environment.

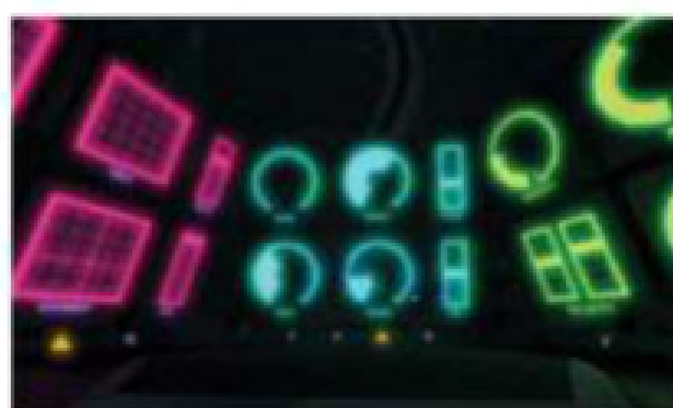
This same experience is being ported over to real-world situations, too, with simulation-heavy racing games *iRacing.com*, *Project CARS* and the lesser-known *rFactor 2* all coming with cockpit-fitted VR modes. This time you're much closer to the ground, but the feeling of being inside that vehicle – and the risk that should come with it – will likely be as tangible as its space simulation brethren. Then there's this new breed of exploratory first-person games that practically sell VR on their premise alone. The excellent *Ether One* is already functioning with Oculus, but survival equivalents in The Forest and The Long Dark are currently implementing virtual reality. With more than 100 games currently available or planned to be coming to some form of VR, 2015's going to be an exciting year for gamers.

GAMES TO WATCH



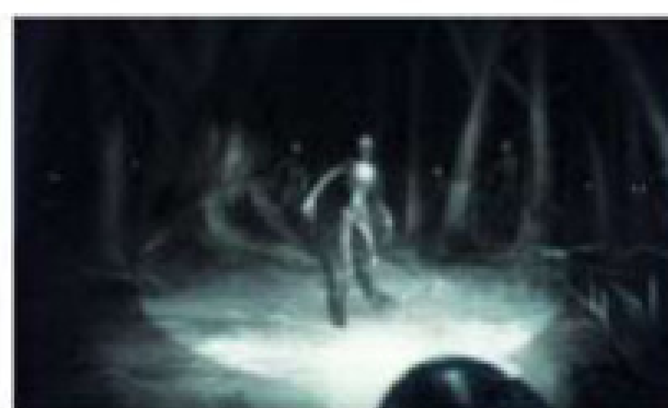
DAYZ STANDALONE

YOU MIGHT SCOFF at this, since many fans are critical of *DayZ Standalone* and its updates – and often lack there of – but virtual reality would potentially make this already intense and engrossing zombie survival game all the more immersive.



FRACT OSC

AS AN AUDIO driven first-person exploration game, *Fract OSC*'s combination of both visual and audio crescendos will make for a fascinating experience when strapped inside a VR headset. It already offers something different and unique, this will only make it more so.



GRAVE

THE NEW CONTINGENT of *Amnesia*-inspired first-person horror games are only going to get more popular, but Grave's an interesting one with procedurally-generated, surrealist horror occurring each time the sun goes down. It's built with Oculus in mind, and will be coming to PS4 too.

BEYOND THE NEW FRONTIER

One of the most attractive things in sci-fi is the idea of discovery – the fantasy of escaping the mundanity of life and finding something new. Due to the sheer number of planets in *No Man's Sky*, it looks like that will actually be possible. Even if you pick the game up 40 years after it's released, the odds are still incredibly high that you'll venture upon a planet that no other player has yet set foot on. That's not just a first in gaming, but a first in fiction. It's sci-fi's oldest promise, realised.



NO MAN'S SKY

"IT'S A FIXER-UPPER OF A PLANET BUT WE COULD MAKE IT WORK"

Format: PC, PS4 **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Hello Games
Developer: In-house **Release:** Q4 2015 **Players:** TBA

WHEN HUMANS WERE exploring the earth, a plethora of fiction was written to chronicle the mixed emotions we experienced as a race: trepidation, excitement, achievement, terror. Now, we've charted the earth and our attentions have turned to space. The likes of *Interstellar*, *Destiny*, *Gravity*, *Elite* and *Mass Effect* have done a fantastic job of commenting on humanity's preoccupation with the 'final' frontier, but *No Man's Sky* plans to further that – taking the gaping black cosmoses above and rendering them habitable, colourful, attainable.

No Man's Sky's biggest selling point as a work of science-fiction is its infinite universe – well, not quite infinite: the game's director Sean Murray has stated that there are 18,446,744,073,709,551,616 planets. That number hasn't just been plucked out of the air, unsurprisingly; it comes from the fact Hello Games will be making the game with a 64-bit processing system – and Hello chose 2 to the power of 64 to give itself some kind-of ethereal constraint… that means even if a player discovered one planet every second, it'd still take 585 *billion* years for every possible planet to be discovered. And if Hello Games is to be believed, you won't encounter a second of loading time during that epic odyssey.





TALKIN' 'BOUT MY GENERATING

The 18 quintillion number is impressive, but without content and depth, its nothing more than that. Luckily, the procedural generation that Hello Games is working on allows the game's engine to populate each planet with different types of alien creature, and game director Sean Murray seems intent with angling this procedural generation to attack a more alien route – the rich sci-fi vistas Hello is creating would be wasted if you just found the same old deer everywhere, right?

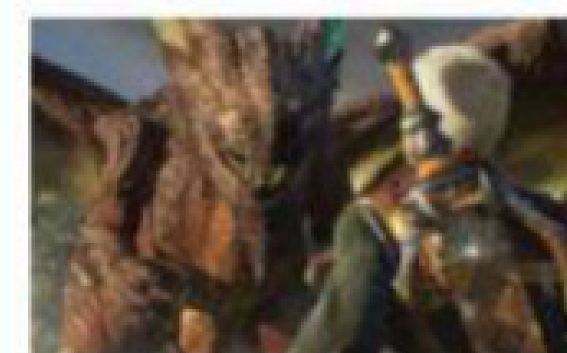
SHIP SHAPE

■ There are three main classes of ship: fighter, trader and explorer. The classes themselves are pretty self explanatory, and help to offer insight into how *No Man's Sky* will play: there will be enemy AI dotted around the planets (with wildlife and enemies populating roughly 10 per cent of the in-game content) which the fighter will inevitably have to attack; there'll be orbiting space stations the traders can deposit their wares at; and we assume the explorers will be quicker and more nimble than their assault and merchant counterparts. Which class will you choose?



5 MORE XBOX ONE GAMES TO KEEP AN EYE ON

SCALEBOUND **Developer:** Platinum Games



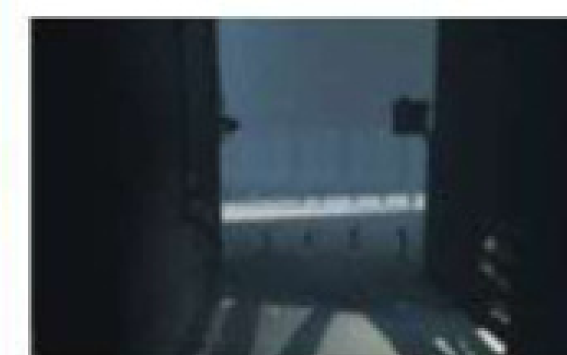
■ Monsters, dragons and over-the-top sequences that'll make an action game worthy of its title. That's the core pitch for *Scalebound*, coming from the mind behind the likes of *Bayonetta*, *Devil May Cry* and *The Wonderful 101*. The whole game revolves around you fighting alongside a giant dragon: what's not to like?

PHANTOM DUST **Developer:** Microsoft Game Studios



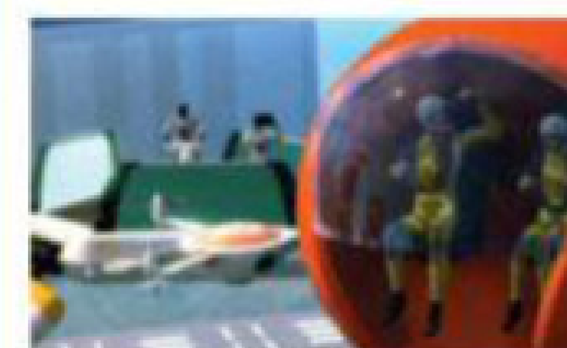
■ *Phantom Dust* was released on the first Xbox – it's an action-strategy game that revolved around collecting cards and skills to complete missions. 2015 promises the release of a graphically updated version – a remake in the vein of *Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD*.

INSIDE **Developer:** Playdead



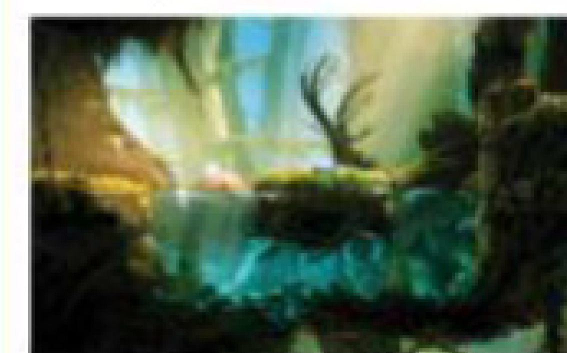
■ The spiritual successor to *Limbo*, *Inside* is a 2.5D platformer that takes the aesthetic in Playdead's critically acclaimed first game and splashes it with a little bit of red. The game's setting moves away from the 'down the rabbit hole' feel of *Limbo* and moves into a more Orwellian setting. Inside is a timed Xbox One exclusive.

SCREAMRIDE **Developer:** Frontier Developments



■ Ever wanted to make your own futuristic theme park? The team that brought the world *Elite: Dangerous* is also bringing us a very safe kind of danger (or not, depending on how you play…). With destructible environments and gravity defying structures, *ScreamRide* challenges you to break the laws of physics.

ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST
Developer: Moon Studios

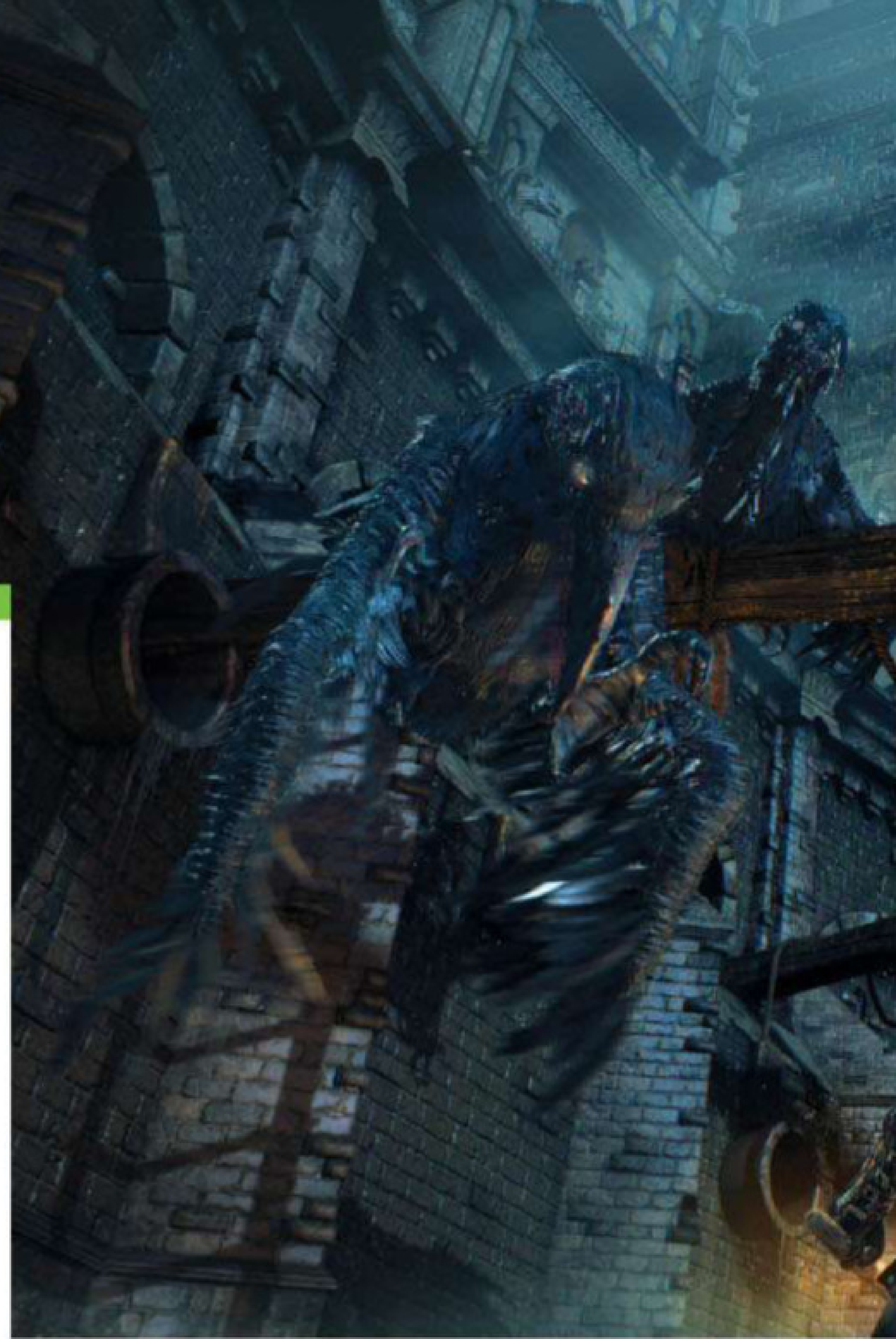


■ Artistically guided by the likes of *The Iron Giant* and *The Lion King*, *Ori* clearly wants to make its coming of age story a family-friendly nostalgia-inducing sojourn through adolescence and the baptisms of fire that come with aging. Think *Child Of Light* with a focus on exploration.

BLOODBORNE

A JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN

Format: PS4 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Sony **Developer:** From Software **Release:** 27 March 2015 **Players:** 1-2



A CHALICE DUNGEON. Just the name sounds ominous, a juxtaposition of something regal and grand with a place of torment and pain. They appear across *Bloodborne*'s ten areas, although, given that they're procedurally generated, each player will perceive them differently. Game director Hidetaka Miyazaki goes so far as to compare them with "old-school roguelike games" as it's impossible to plan too far ahead given their random nature.

The one we're shown takes place underground, in a series of forboding pits, corridors, walkways and galleries of macabre Victorian influence. Candles light sodden, grey stone walls. Paintings hang lopsided next to them, flickering in the disturbing shadows. Ornate details on banisters and doors sit uncomfortably within the gloom. We're not alone, thankfully; we're joined by a 'White Hunter' multiplayer companion, their identity left purposefully hidden in order to elevate further the sense of confusion and unpredictability. White Hunter's skills are dissimilar to those of our own, a differentiation that will come in rather handy later.

/// Both enemies and traps represent danger, with the placement, variety and quantity of both altering each time you head through the same Chalice Dungeon. The idea is quite clearly to force a considered approach to movement, with every step you take accompanied by keen observation and caution. Hardly a surprising idea when taking into account From Software's prior form.

Wandering into a corridor sets off a chain reaction. Somehow a boulder trap has been tripped and, in the finest traditions of *Indiana Jones*, it's a race against time to avoid becoming just another statistic. Before the end of the boulder tunnel the floor gives way and our Hunter finds himself in a new area, danker and further from human civilisation. Here the rocks and underground waterways still rule, with barely a brick, stone or stair to be seen. A flaming torch is our only solace.

It's impossible to judge just how variable this dungeon really is without playing through it multiple times, but it's the shock factor of suddenly finding yourself in an alien environment like this one that will provide the tension and surprise. Should such a thing happen too much you'll begin to expect it and the impact will be muted. If it doesn't happen enough you'll question the point of revisiting the same areas. Pacing, as is so often the case, will determine impact.

The real killer in this underground chamber is the damp itself, as it quickly becomes clear that the floor is covered in oil and not water. Enemies have seemingly evolved to take advantage of such a phenomenon and sport various adaptations capable of setting it alight. Most dangerous of the bunch is a stooped-over humanoid that towers over us at least twice our height, his forearms replaced by red-hot spikes of bone. Striking these deformed limbs into the oil sets it ablaze, encouraging you to stay mobile and always be ready to retreat to the one of the few patches of solid ground that litter the area.

Defeating this foe is best achieved using a weapon of significant heft and power, our light axe/saw just isn't going to cut it. Up to this point we've been alone, the labyrinthine design of the dungeon seeing our White Hunter friend head off in a different direction, and we

"THE PLACEMENT, VARIETY AND QUANTITY OF ENEMIES AND TRAPS ALTER EACH TIME"





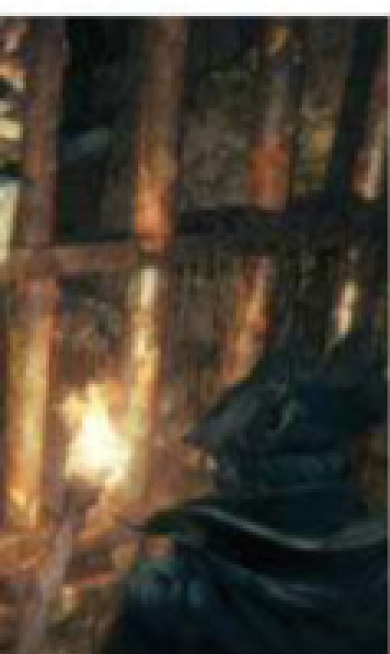
Above If you were expecting the local fauna to be, if not on your side, then at least neutral... you should probably think again and plan accordingly.

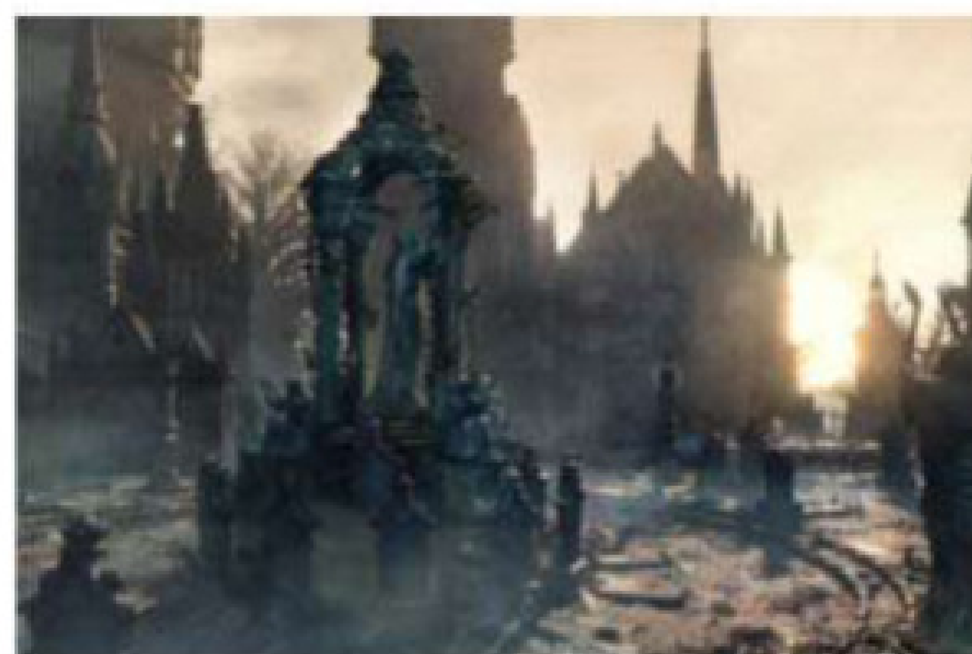




PULL THE SWITCH

Littered throughout the Chalice Dungeons are what From Software is calling 'activation switches': optional levers that open up different routes and rooms. For instance, flipping one of these unlocked a door into a seemingly abandoned circular chamber. Stepping into it unleashed a giant wolf boss burning from head to toe. It seems that these kinds of boss fights are non-essential and you can avoid them by not engaging with the switches. However, it's likely impossible to be able to look ahead and gauge what effect you're going to have on the world. Curiosity can kill, but could you really resist?



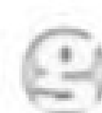




Below Combat is slightly faster than that of *Dark Souls*, with greater emphasis on dodging and ducking out of harm's way.



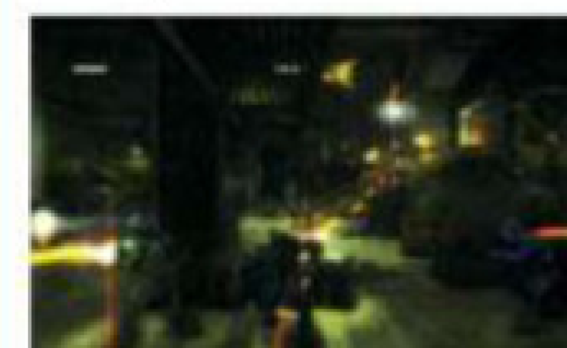
haven't seen them since. Wonderful, then, that they should now show up at this very moment carrying a hammer that makes Thor's look like a sawn-off putter. Taking an alternative route out of this area leads us to a balcony overlooking the dungeon's starting room, further highlighting the intricate structure of the area. Presumably, this balcony couldn't have been reached without navigating through the zone in any other way – but that may not be the case.

It's that irregularity and confusion that makes the Chalice Dungeon idea a charismatic one. While *Dark Souls*' environments were maze-like in their architecture, once you had worked out the layout of an area you knew it for eternity from then on. These dungeons are a step away from that kind of decisiveness, another hurdle of uncertainty to overcome. 

5 MORE PS4 GAMES TO WATCH

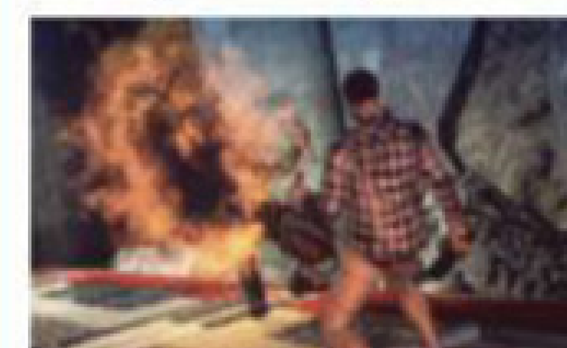
NOT INTERESTED IN BLOODBORNE? NONE OF THESE ARE ANYTHING LIKE IT...

HOLLOWPOINT
Developer: Ruffian Games



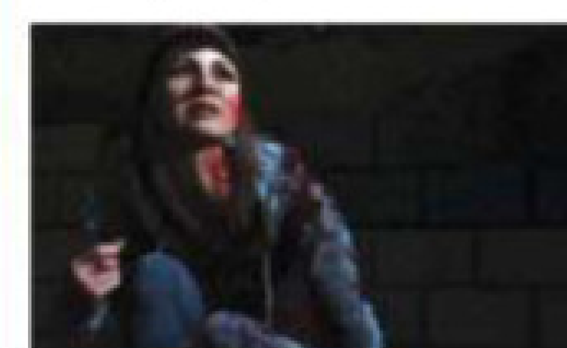
A blend of 2D and 3D, *Hollowpoint* is what Scotland-based Ruffian Games (Crackdown 2) is calling a "highly tactical, action-packed combat experience". The idea is to navigate through missions by blending different skill sets together.

LET IT DIE
Developer: Grasshopper Manufacture



A free-to-play hack 'n' slasher might not sound that interesting, but anything involving Goichi Suda (*No More Heroes*, *Shadows Of The Damned*) is worth taking notice of. And if you die then your avatar will appear in another player's game.

UNTIL DAWN
Developer: Supermassive Games



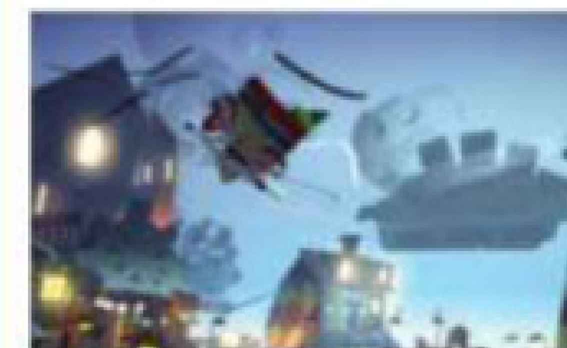
Many people have tried to bring a movie-like experience to videogames, many have failed. *Until Dawn* is trying something a little different, though, putting you in charge of eight characters. Their lives depend on your choices.

THE TOMORROW CHILDREN
Developer: Q-Games

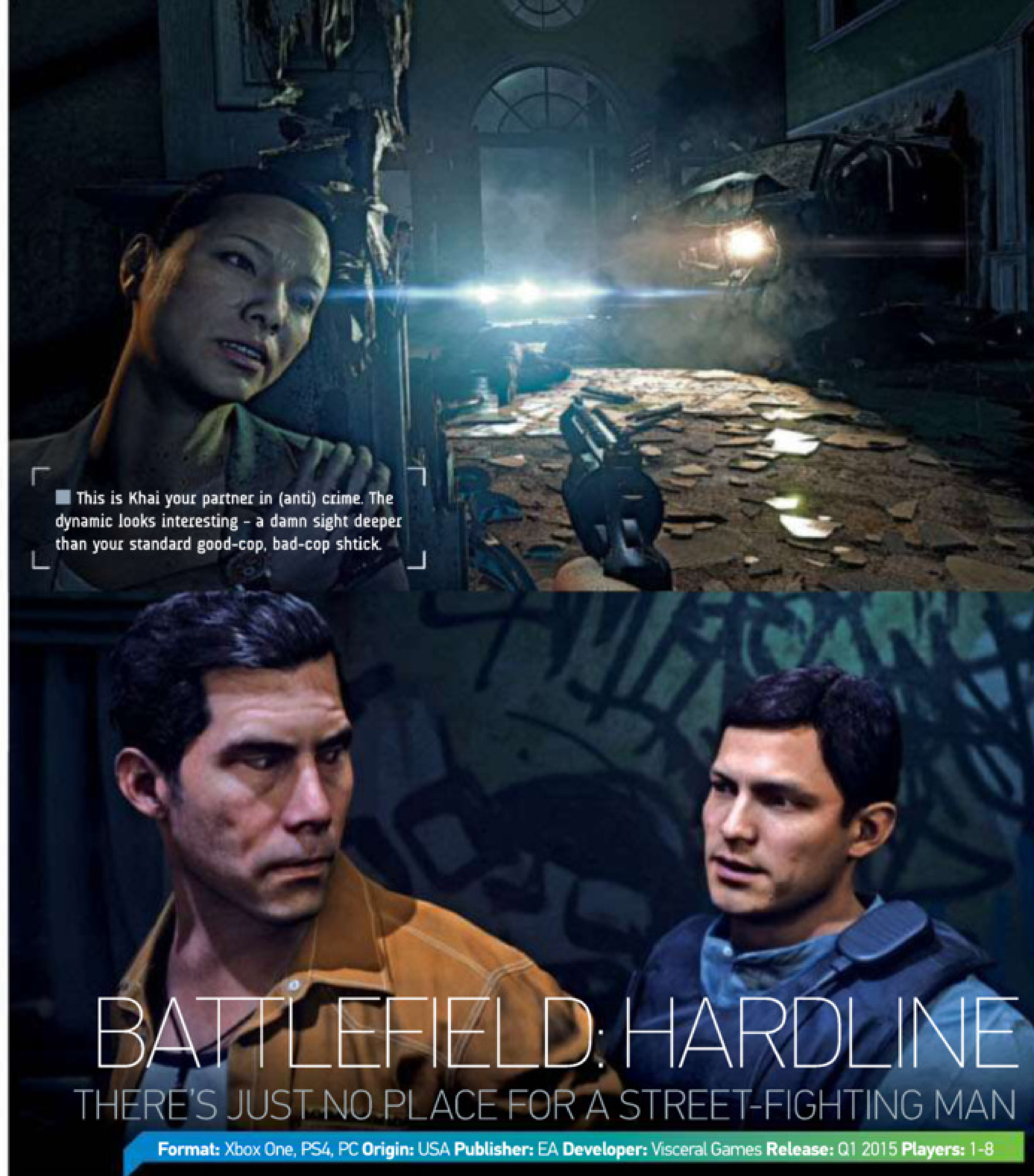


Undoubtedly one of the more bizarre games to be announced in 2014, *The Tomorrow Children* is one part *Minecraft*, one part communist-themed psychology test. Mining and building are core to the design, but so is asking players to cooperate in this odd world.

TEARAWAY UNFOLDED
Developer: Media Molecule



It seems that Media Molecule is taking an 'if it ain't broke' tack, with *Unfolded* essentially being an expanded version of its delightful predecessor *Tearaway*, with the DualShock 4's touchpad substituting rather nicely for the Vita's touch screen.



This is Khai your partner in (anti) crime. The dynamic looks interesting – a damn sight deeper than your standard good-cop, bad-cop shtick.

BATTLEFIELD: HARDLINE

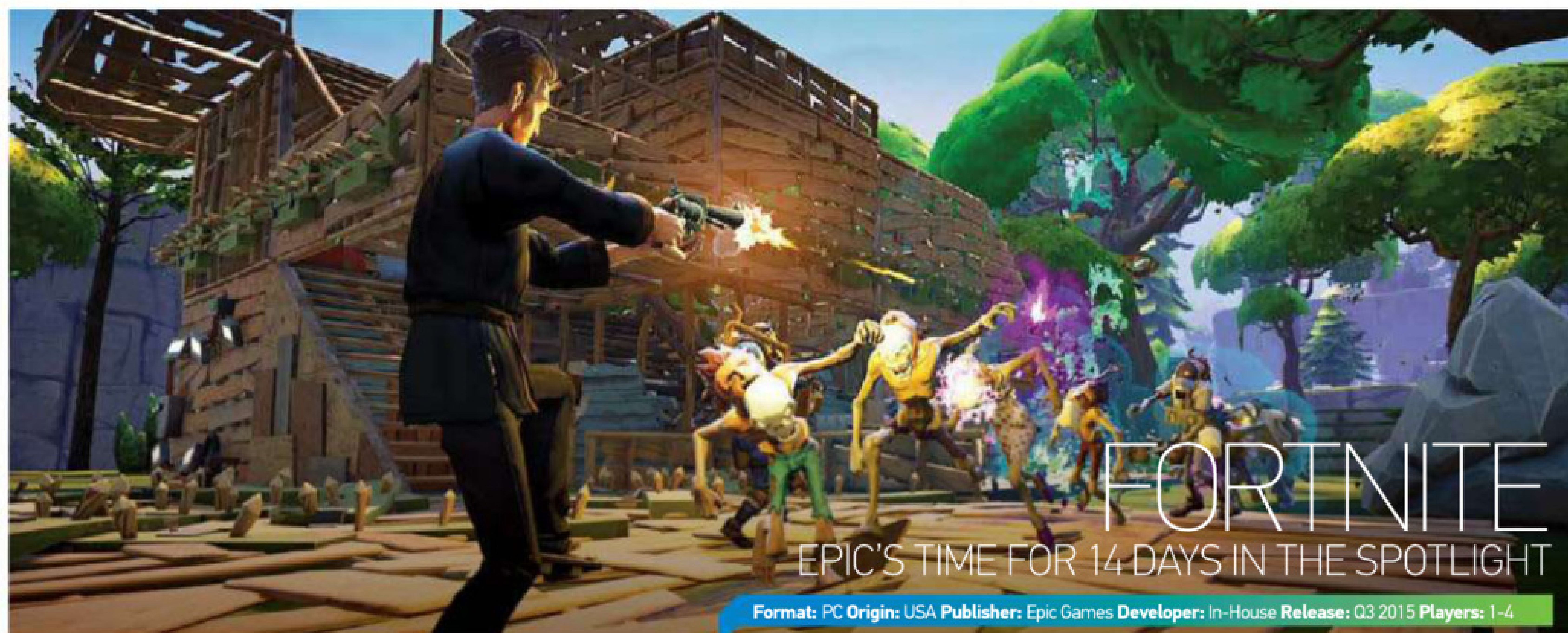
THERE'S JUST NO PLACE FOR A STREET-FIGHTING MAN

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** Visceral Games **Release:** Q1 2015 **Players:** 1-8

WE'VE SPOKEN AT length about how *Battlefield: Hardline* plans to shape its online gameplay in this magazine, so we're going to dedicate this preview to what we've seen of the game's single-player campaign. *Battlefield 4* attracted criticism for having one of the most paper-thin story modes an FPS had seen, but *Hardline* looks like it wants to remedy that.

The main conceit in *Hardline* is that you're a police officer this time around – granted, you're a heavily militarised, 'with extreme prejudice' police officer, but still – and thus your objective in the campaign is to hunt down perps. To this end, you're given a scanner that lets you mark enemies and objectives, as well as listen in to distant conversations. It's a magical game-mechanic-in-a-device that's well explained, though; in fact, *Hardline* takes care to deconstruct Nick Mendoza – your protagonist – and comment on the militarisation of civilian police forces.

As the narrative progresses, Nick and his partner are thrown over both sides of the law, and the game rewards you straying further away from the thin blue line with heavier and heavier weapons. It feels like a point's being made – though you parade around as a cop, you'll be toting rocket launchers, C-4 and heavy machine guns. With the American tensions afloat at the moment regarding an almost militia-like police force, could Visceral really be making a point about policing a Western nation?

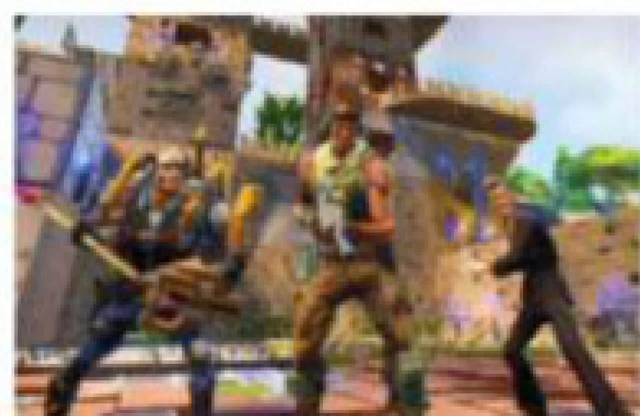


FORTNITE

EPIC'S TIME FOR 14 DAYS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Format: PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Epic Games **Developer:** In-House **Release:** Q3 2015 **Players:** 1-4

The third-person, building-and-shooting mechanic is an interesting take on the industry's current obsession with craft-like games.



EPIC'S INTERNAL UNREAL Engine 4 is under close scrutiny from us right now: we're extremely keen to see what the industry's premier engine's new form can achieve, especially as its decade-long dominance is challenged by upcoming engine Unity. To that end, Epic has a lot to prove with *Fortnite* – the first internally developed game on the Unreal 4 engine, and the first notable 'big' release from the studio since *Gears of War 3*. Billed as a co-op sandbox survival game, *Fortnite* operates around a central day/night system and the core conceit is that you must scavenge for materials and defences by day, fight and defend yourself by night. Remember Horde mode in *Gears*? It's basically like a game made out of that idea – sniff out items that'll allow you to make structural fortifications, then construct defences that'll allow you to fight off multiple waves of the undead without too much of a problem. Forts and construction works within a 3x3 grid, and you can build on multiple levels: we anticipate managing to build the *best* fort, something you even gain an emotional attachment to before some terrifying boss-class monster arrives and destroys everything you've worked towards. It's going to be tense, and it's going to be *fun*.

"WE'RE INTRIGUED TO SEE WHERE PRATCHETT IS GOING TO TAKE THIS"

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

LIKE A WEARY PILGRIMAGE AMONG HINTS FOR NIGHTMARES

Format: Xbox One, PS4 **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** Square Enix **Developer:** Crystal Dynamics **Release:** Q4 2015 **Players:** TBA

IF YOU'VE BEEN out of the Lara loop since completing 2013's *Tomb Raider* reboot, allow us to fill you in: there has been a series of comics released that are filling in the gaps between where 2013 Lara left off, and where 2015 Lara will pick up. Penned by Gail Simone, the comics chart the continued development of Lara, who's metamorphosing from the ambitious but delicate University graduate you see in the reboot into the hardened spelunker we know and love from our childhood days.

Voice actress Camilla Luddington will reprise her role as Lara for the sequel, pairing up with previous *Tomb Raider* writer Rhianna Pratchett. The duo managed to make Lara a far more empathic and humanised character last time, so we're confident the writing and acting talent on the sequel will be as strong (if not stronger) than 2013's release. Crystal Dynamics has also confirmed that there will actually be tombs in this game, too – fan outcry from Tomb Raider was listened to, it seems.

The game also looks set to travel a more self-referential and introspective path – Lara's experiences in the Dragon's Triangle have left her fatigued and scarred, her physical cuts and bruises almost insignificant compared to the mental trauma she's suffered. The fact Lara is in therapy is the only hard fact we know about the game so far – and the fact we're treated to a languid close-up of the therapist's face means he's likely to have some part in narrative (we're willing to bet he manipulates Lara into doing something awful, full-on Hugo Strange style).

But we're intrigued to see where Pratchett is going to take this – we anticipate a *Heart Of Darkness*-style journey to the centre of some unforgiving wilderness, Lara's targeted plunder merely a MacGuffin: the true reason she seeks to travel into the chaos is for her own ends, to satiate the adrenaline addiction she's gained, to experience the primal fight-or-flight instincts that made her who she is today.

2013's *Tomb Raider* touched upon some smart ideas in its writing, but ultimately kept them to the side, the gameplay seeming to jostle the narrative out of the way whenever it could. While we don't mind that, it would be wonderful to see *Rise of the Tomb Raider* really start to deconstruct Lara's character, and make the things we have to do in her shoes *truly* define the Lara we got to know way back in 1996.





Expect to see more tools fall into your hands in Lara's new playgrounds: grappling hooks, ice picks and torches are just the beginning – we'd quite like to see a pneumatic crossbow, if possible...



The 'Chekhov's Gun' rule means that anything you see is there for a reason – we're being shown this therapist because he's going to have a big influence.

2015 LEVELS UP

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

A NEW CHALLENGER HAS ENTERED THE GAME

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC **Origin:** Poland **Publisher:** Bandai Namco
Developer: CD Projekt Red **Release:** 19 May 2015 **Players:** 1

Yennefer has been referenced in previous *Witcher* games, but this is her first appearance as a major player in current events. Her Sorceress abilities make her a worthy ally, while her backstory with Geralt may lead to some interesting side stories.

THE RISE OF *The Witcher* in the wider gaming consciousness has been a journey to behold. From respected indie PC RPG to triple-A, next-gen, best in class adventure in the span of eight years is quite an achievement. *The Witcher 3* for the first time carries the expectation of being a challenger to the likes of *Dragon Age* and *Elder Scrolls*, rather than an outside scrapper of the *Dragon's Dogma* variety. But that's a position CD Projekt Red has battled for and taken hold of with demo after demo and trailer after trailer of jaw-dropping quality.

The latest piece of news to add a little excitement to *The Witcher 3*'s slightly delayed release is that there's a second playable character. This was mistaken by some to mean a fully playable character option other than Geralt or even perhaps the option of co-op. CD Projekt has since clarified it means only another character who for unknown periods of the game you will embody to see some other elements of the story. The good money at the moment is that the character in question will either be the sorceress Yennefer, an old companion of Geralt's, or Ciri, the woman the Wild Hunt appears to be chasing and who herself has historic ties to the Witcher.

The other very important piece of news regarding *The Witcher 3* is the 16 pieces of free DLC the game will be delivering post-launch. So far only four have been revealed, being an armour set, beard and hairstyles for Geralt, an alternative Yennefer costume (perhaps adding weight to her being the other playable character) and a contract mission called Missing Miners. It's not exactly game-changing stuff, but given how some other companies like to squeeze every last penny out of a game with Season Passes and pre-order exclusives, CD Projekt is making a pretty big statement about its views on such practices with this announcement.

While we wait for more information about secret characters and further free DLC, we must simply sit back and gaze upon the glory of what we continue to see from this game. Smooth combat, epic battles, imaginative use of magic that feels as close to plausible as such things can and a scale that's really quite inspiring. CD Projekt held this game back again for further development so it could get *The Witcher 3* right and all signs are pointing to that being a smart move.



5 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT... GEARS OF WAR 4

HOW WILL LIFE AFTER EPIC BEGIN?

1. INNOVATION

All the word from Microsoft is that it's looking for Black Tusk to make something fresh and give the series a new spin. That's not to say it will be making wholesale changes, but Microsoft wants its flagship franchise to stand out, just like the first game did when it launched on Xbox 360.

2. UNREAL ENGINE 4

Unreal 4 is key to this project. Even before Black Tusk was handed the reins of *Gears Of War* last year, it was a studio built to work with and master Unreal Engine 4. Microsoft originally had it working on a new triple-A project, but now it's fully committed to bringing Epic's franchise to a new generation of console.

3. A NEW ENTRY

This is no reboot – while there's no clear word yet on when in the *Gears Of War* timeline this new game will be set, everyone has been keen to make clear, this will not be a reboot of the franchise. Delta squad may return, but if it does it will be at some earlier or later point in their story, not as a reimagining of the original games.

4. EXAMINING ITS ORIGINS

It's going back to its roots; Rod Fergusson has been working with *Gears Of War* since the beginning, having been at Epic, and now he's the custodian of the series, heading up the new team at Black Tusk. What he wants to do with this new game is get it back to the core values of *Gears* with a dark, challenging setting.

5. EVOLUTION

Expect more to come, and by that we don't mean news, we mean games. Microsoft bought the rights to *Gears* from Epic, lock, stock and barrel, so however it reignites on Xbox One, expect more to come on the console from Black Tusk and maybe even some new spin-offs further down the line for the franchise.

EVOLVE

50 SHADES OF GREY

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC **Origin:** US **Publisher:** 2K **Developer:** Turtle Rock **Release:** 10 Feb 2015 **Players:** 1-5

TURTLE ROCK STUDIOS is a team that has earned its buzz. When your two-game catalogue consists of the genre-defining *Left 4 Dead* and its even better sequel, you've earned the right to have people talking about you in glowing terms. And as such, the announcement of *Evolve*, a four-on-one competitive/coop shooter on next-gen and PC, has been met with fevered intrigue.

Of course, with such a groundswell of pre-release approval, the news of *Evolve*'s 'Big' Alpha was met with similar enthusiasm. Thousands of keys were made available to the public, and it only took a single tweet suggesting you have a spare code for a deluge of begging requests to fill up your @ box. Yet, after extensive time spent in Turtle Rock's new combative jungle, it was hard not to feel disappointed. *Evolve* is currently a game lacking direction, a ponderous trudge through murky grey jungle, desperately searching for action, excitement and structure.

The concept sounds great on paper of course. Four class-based hunters must track and eliminate a vicious monster by scouring the ground for tracks, watching the skies for frightened birds and scouring the foliage for felled creatures, which the monster needs to kill in order to grow and become more powerful. When the two sides come together, the hunters use weaponry and traps to crush the beast while trying desperately to stay alive. The game ends when the monster dies, the hunters are all killed (after two respawns each), or the monster evolves and destroys a specific stronghold on the map.

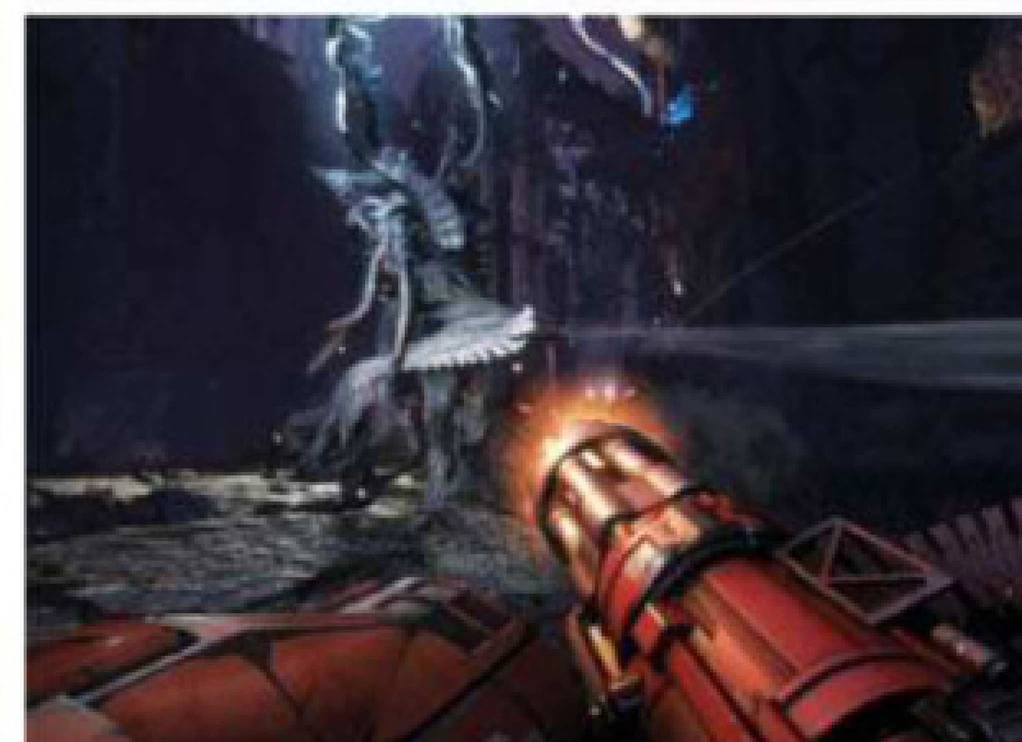
Currently, though, this just does not translate well to actual enjoyment. The best tactic when playing as the beast is to keep your distance from the hunters, kill smaller animals in the jungle, and wait until you're fully evolved before you attack. This can take upwards of ten minutes. So for the hunters, most of a match can be spent running into an expanse of nothingness, desperately searching for something to do.

It's a curious and misguided approach. There is almost no enjoyment to be had in tracking the monster – its speed makes it extremely difficult to catch, and the balance of the game appears to be in favour of inaction. The hunters have tools to stop the monster from escaping once they do catch up to it – the Trapper class can erect a large electronic dome to fence the beast in, and lay down harpoons to pin it in place – but this is predicated on actually coming into contact with it. All too often, minutes disappear, with the four-person team doing almost nothing in that time. When you do get into a scrap, the weapons themselves feel puny and the feedback from blasting the beast is sorely lacking. It feels like









"WE'D BE HAPPY TO GO TOE-TO-TOE WITH ANY OTHER GAME OUT THERE, BUT FOR US WE WANT THE GAME TO BE AS GOOD AS IT CAN POSSIBLY BE"
DENBY GRACE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCE, 2K GAMES

Below Experienced players will gain much more enjoyment from *Evolve* thanks to understanding the nuances of the monster's movement and the choke points in the map. It needs more for new players, though.

Above There are three monsters available right now. The alpha featured the gorilla-like Goliath and the flying Cloverfield-type called the Kraken, with the final beast saved for the full game. They play differently but have the same goal.

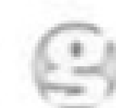
EVERYTHING'S NOT AWESOME

Quite why Turtle Rock has chosen to make *Evolve* such a monochromatic experience is a mystery. Its world of scaly beasts and dense foliage has detail in abundance, but it's almost impossible to enjoy it because it's all so bloody grey. It's unpleasant to look at – like the original *Gears Of War* but grimier and completely devoid of that game's juxtaposing bright reds. Perhaps highlighting the monster with bright colours would have stripped the experience of some of its tension, but in the selection of maps available in the beta, there's so little difference between them it's actually very tricky to figure out which one is which.

a bullet sponge boss from an MMO, and not the centrepiece of an entire game.

The maps are littered with other creatures too, from small fauna to large animals that can kill humans and the monster itself. Their proliferation makes them seem important, but it's very easy to ignore most of them when you're on the hunter team. It feels like at some point the hunters should be able to use the fauna to attract the beast towards them, but at no point in the alpha did this become a reality.

Evolve currently feels like a game that might produce real moments of quality when played exclusively by those who both know its systems intricately and choose to play it the 'right' way, but for a wider player base, it's just boring. Of course, this is from the alpha, so hopefully there's enough development time left for Turtle Rock to rapidly address these issues. There aren't many people who want to play a game of hide and seek for twenty minutes when there are the likes of *Destiny*, *Titanfall*, *Call Of Duty* and even *Left 4 Dead* itself competing for their attention. *Evolve*, quite simply, needs to evolve.

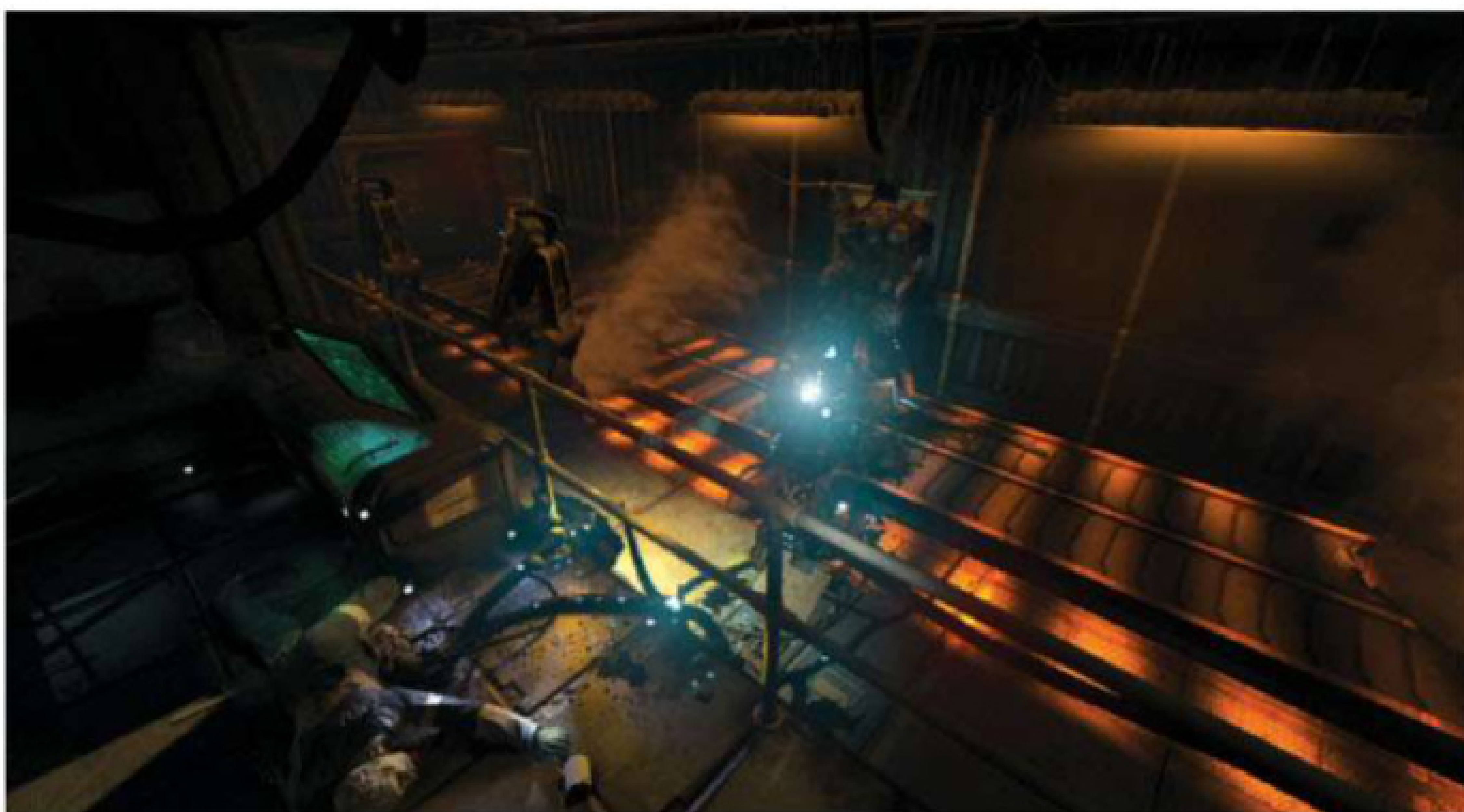


LOVE CRAFT: FRICTIONAL'S UPDATED HPL ENGINE

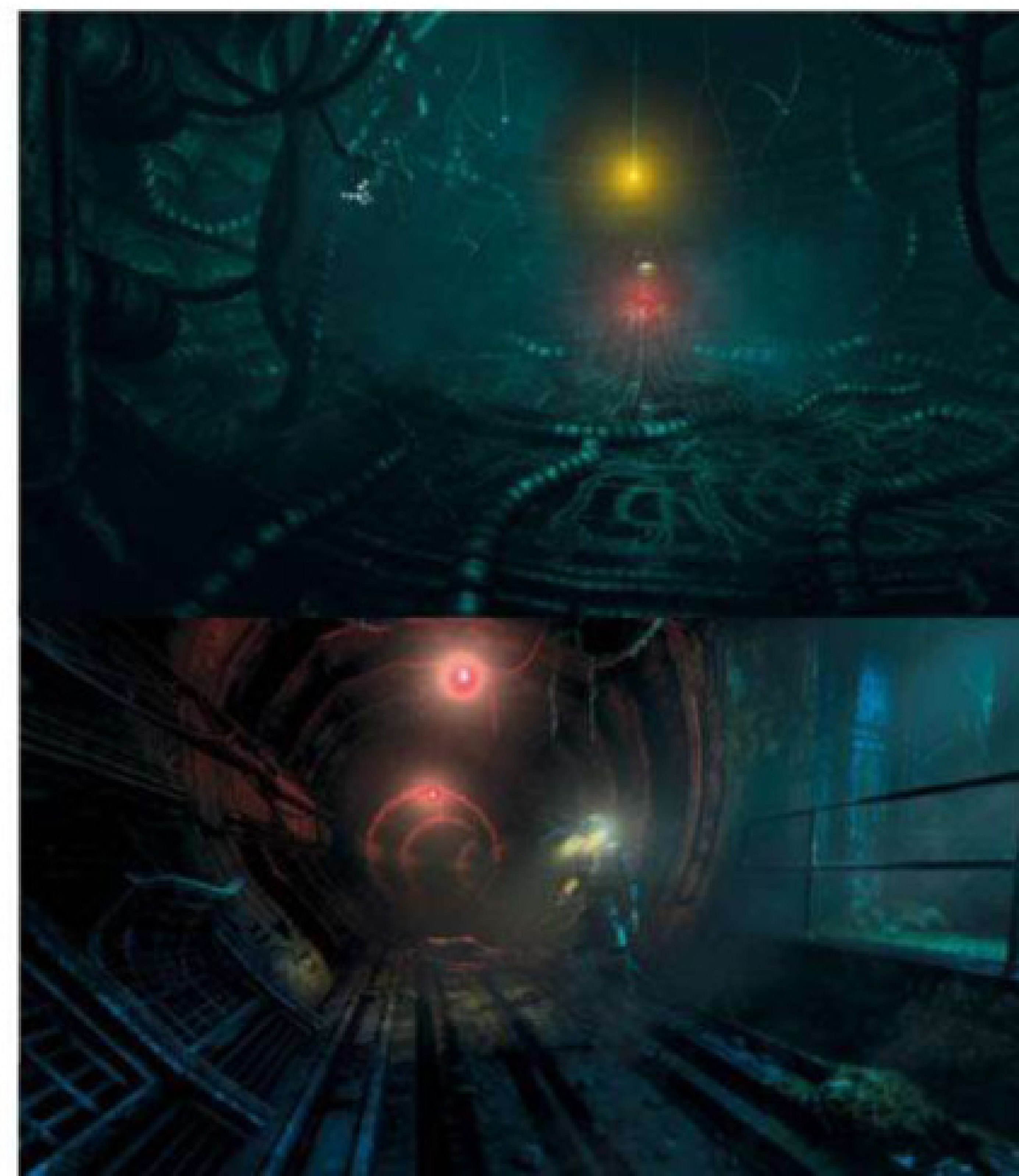
Frictional's HPL Engine started out as a college project powering 2D platformers way back in 2004. Since then it has grown considerably, powering all of Frictional's games. Grip explains the latest alterations. "We've added terrain, we've added HDR lighting. Also, we've done a bunch of changes, because we actually started out making a game targeting Xbox 360…so now, targeting for PS4 has been a lot of technical challenges because the CPU is built upon multithreading. So the CPU is pretty weak if you just use a single core. It comes into its own when you start using it multithreaded."

Above: A dead guy on a trolley is never a good sign in a Frictional game.

Below: Working on a production line can be murder.



Below: Some of the environments have an H.R. Giger-ish vibe about them.



SOMA

FRICTIONAL CO-FOUNDER THOMAS GRIP EXPLAINS HOW THE TEAM IS REINVENTING THE HORROR GENRE AGAIN AFTER AMNESIA

Format: PC, OSX, PS4 **Origin:** Sweden **Publisher:** Frictional Games **Developer:** In-house
Release: Q1 2015 **Players:** 1

LEAVING YOU DEFENCELESS in a 19th Century Gothic castle, *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* was a watershed moment for horror games. Frictional's masterpiece focused on hiding and evasion over combat-based survival, and built tension through narrative exploration rather than *Dead Space*-like jump-scares.

Amnesia spawned a legion of imitators, its template becoming the standard followed by many horror titles. But for its next game, Frictional wanted to try something new, to move away from hiding in cupboards from monsters in the dark, and explore a deeper, more significant kind of horror. This search resulted in a project that has lasted almost five years.

First off, what is *SOMA*?
SOMA is a horror game but it's also a very sci-fi-focused game, and something that we want to explore in the game is consciousness. And it's not just a sort of a layer on top of everything else. It's something that is ingrained in the whole experience. For instance the most famous author we're inspired by is Philip K Dick. And we want to make that sort of experience as a game.

It's been over four years since *Amnesia*. Why has there been such a gap between projects?
Basically, it's been very hard to figure out how we want to approach the game. A simple example is the dialogue system, which is something we have struggled with *a lot*, we've spent tons and tons of time on it, and we've thrown so much work away. There are certain questions that we want the player to ask themselves. It's hard to go into them without spoiling too much, but basically we want them to think about their own awareness and their own being in certain ways.

***SOMA* is set in an underwater facility. What led you to choose that setting?**
Underwater is very much a big part of the game. The water is going to be something that you feel throughout most of the game. Even if you're indoors you're going to hear it creaking, see it leaking and be aware of it. So it's going to be a presence that you feel throughout the entire game. You're going to be walking outside as well.

This has also been an interesting design challenge, because open spaces are something that we haven't done in our games before. If you look at other terrain games, you have long visibility, so if you 're going to some building in the distance, you can see it if you're far away. But for us that's not possible because twenty metres there's nothing to see. And you want that. It gives you that nice, oppressive underwater feeling.

A major trend of your previous games was use of physics and physics-based puzzles. Is that continuing?
In some ways, *SOMA* is going to be a classic Frictional game. You move from one point to another, you get to some hub worlds. What I think is different is, from *Penumbra* to *Amnesia*, the physics interaction has gone from this huge stuff, like you can operate a crane in *Penumbra*, to *Amnesia* where you can pick up and throw bottles and it crashes, stuff like that. We sort of taken the same step in *SOMA*, where there are more small interactions you can do.

You don't want puzzles to obstruct the story.
It's something that we've thought about a lot, another one of those design things that's been holding us back. Take an example from the game. There's one point where you need to open a door, and there is a machine that you can interact with in different ways, and depending on how you feel towards this machine, you can do different choices. For instance, the machine starts feeling pain. This is a good example. So the player is like "Should I be content with this? Is this a bad thing for me to do? Is this just a machine? Or should I solve this in a different way?"

Because *SOMA* is more about choosing your path, did you make the protagonist less of a defined character?
We thought about having a silent protagonist because it's a very introspective game. But the problem then was a writing problem; if you have a mute character, all other characters you meet are going to treat you as an idiot. So it was like "Okay, he's gonna talk. How much is he gonna talk?"

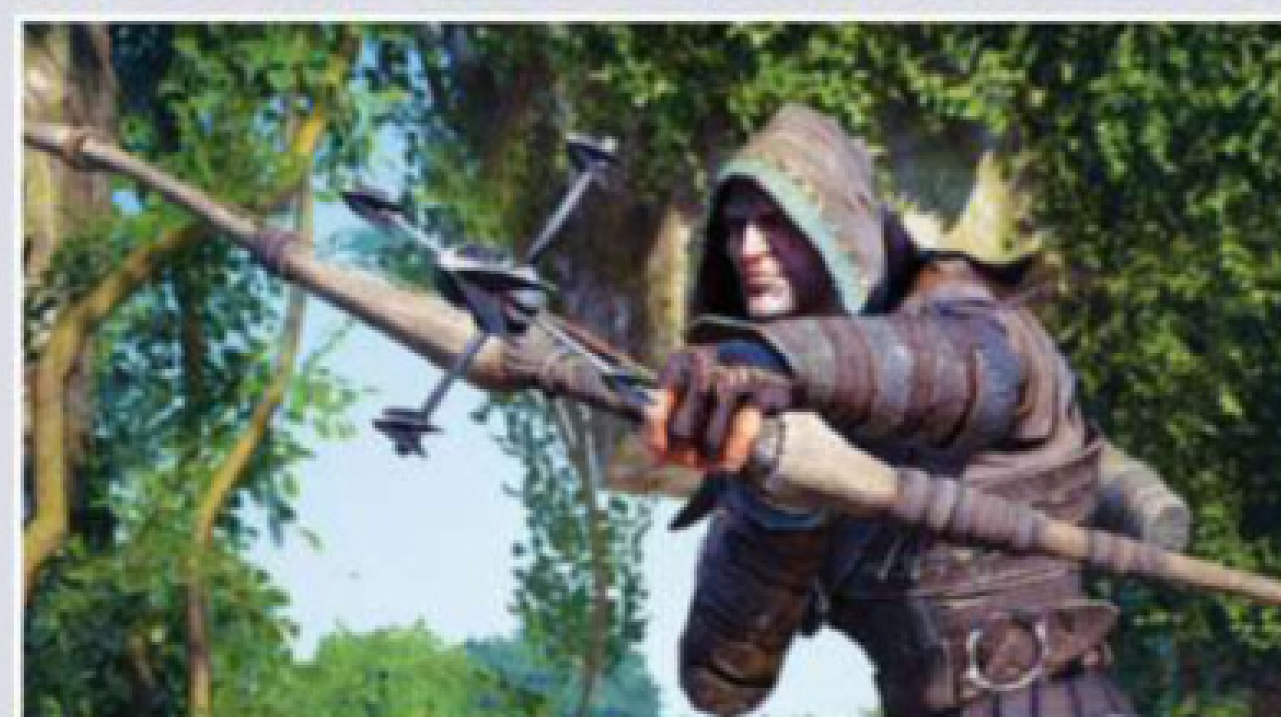
And that was also a big problem. One of the things that we did early on is think "Okay, the character is going to be pretty vanilla. He's not gonna change much, he's just going to be someone players can project on. But then what happened is, players got upset with him not reacting properly. Going through all of these weird and horrible things, and he doesn't react to them. And *that* took them out of the experience as well. So what we had to do was make sure he had a proper arc.

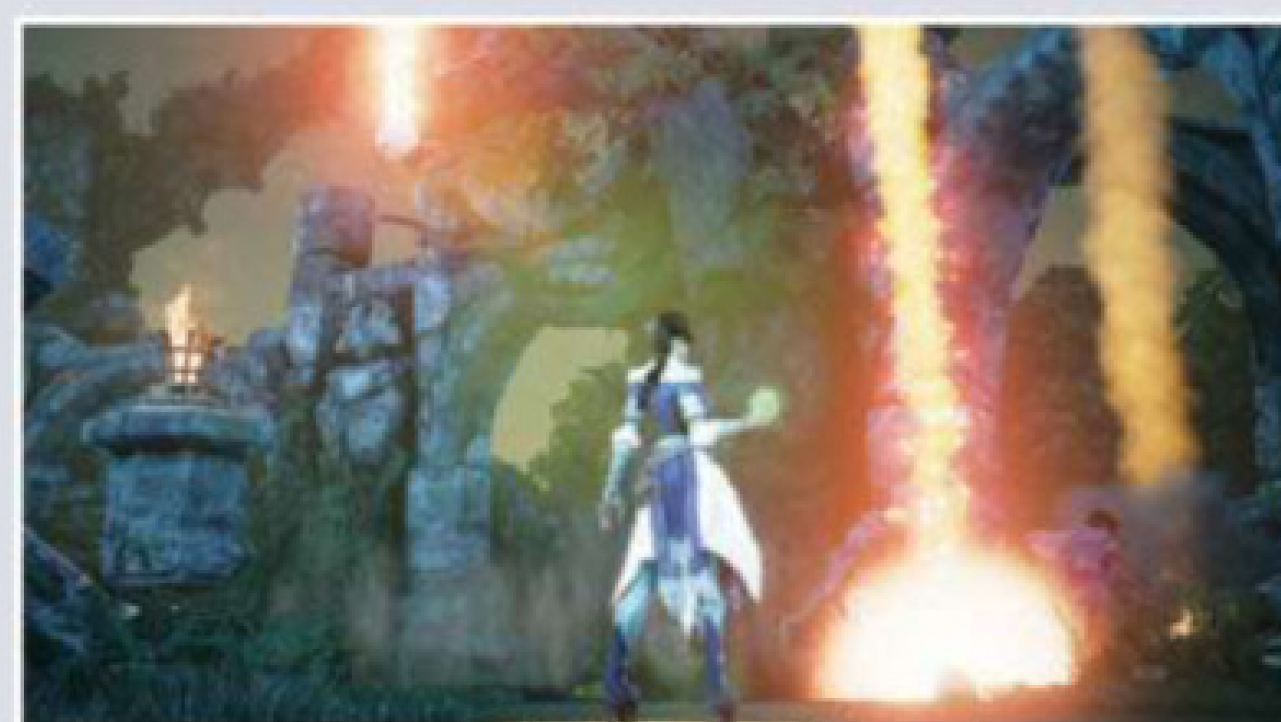
FABLE LEGENDS

A NEW KIND OF TALE









This isn't *Fable* as we're used to playing it, but then it's not Lionhead as we're used to seeing it, either. What we've seen of *Fable Legends* has taken us from sceptical to actually quite excited by the prospect of a more focused, action orientated, online venture into Lionhead's famous fantasy realm. Playing as the heroes, the combat is meaty and varied with stunning visuals thanks to Unreal Engine 4, some great smoke and magic effects and plenty of variety thanks to your class and character selection. On the villain side, the top-down view gives you many tactical options and the challenge of stopping the heroes should make online play a very interesting battle of wits.

2015 LEVELS UP

A CITY BUILT FOR MAYHEM

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment **Developer:** Rocksteady Studios **Release:** 2 June 2015 **Players:** 1

KNOWING WHAT'S GOING to happen and seeing it first hand can be wildly different. We knew the game world would get bigger, we knew Batman would get more precise and intimidating and we have come to understand that the Batmobile would play a key role in combat and navigation around Gotham. Knowing those things didn't prepare us for seeing them all brought together.

The scale of the city in front of us is immense. We say that knowing that we're not looking at a San Andreas or a Skyrim, but while more contained, this game has much greater depth. This is a tighter action game all around with a precise story and structure and yet the city of Gotham is vast and packed with potential. Seeing the Dark Knight stalk its rooftops and swoop through its skies was always a delight, but with so much more to explore now, we'll really be throwing ourselves into this world. While many are moving beyond the aging Unreal Engine 3, we remain impressed with what Rocksteady is squeezing from the technology and in particular how it is managing to find new scope for colour and vibrancy in what would otherwise be a dark and depressing game world.



Environmental takedowns are looking pretty brutal for a character that takes non-fatal combat so seriously. Hopefully the computer consoles and junction boxes are all low voltage.

BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT



There have been concerns that *The Order: 1886* may be a little repetitive in structure, but there's still plenty of the game yet to be revealed. It's got the presentation, now it needs the driving action to deliver.

THE ORDER: 1886

JOLLY GOOD FELLOWS OF WAR

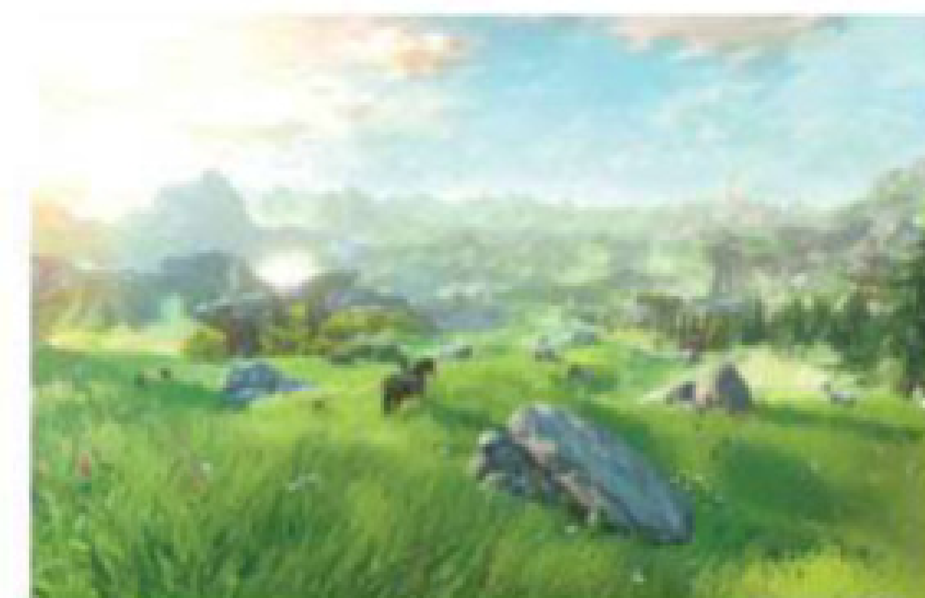
Format: PS4 **Origin:** US **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer:** Ready At Dawn **Release:** 20 February

THERE IS SOMETHING extraordinarily cinematic about *The Order* that seems improbable from something that is, still, a third-person shooter. It seems Ready At Dawn has learnt well from Sony Santa Monica and the way it revolutionised action games with the *God Of War* series. How do you manage to make a genre with a fixed viewpoint (by its very definition) this expressive and framed so perfectly? It's a strange alchemy and one that impresses us more and more each time we see it.

Its mix of mid-Victorian setting, steampunk tech and gorgeous animation is really giving what might otherwise look like a dark and dreary shooter some real flair. A centuries-old battle between humanity and werewolves (we were surprised too) fought by ancient knights who have extended their frontline lives is a nice build-up, and getting to see them play with Tesla's toy box and more is quite a treat.

The Order really is starting to show its flair with some interesting mark and execute moves that show off the kind of skill you would expect from warriors who have spent hundreds of years honing their skills. Perhaps the only omission to this experience so far that would make sense is a lack of co-op, but maybe that would chip away at the precision design Ready At Dawn is putting together.





If Nintendo can match that same glorious sense of freedom that came with escaping Lon Lon Ranch in this new, bigger landscape then it's already won.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA WII U

THE TIMES, THEY ARE A-CHANGING

Format: Wii U **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** In-house **Release:** Q4 2015 **Players:** 1-TBC

FOR A FRANCHISE as prestigious as *The Legend Of Zelda* it can be a little bit worrisome to hear the phrase 'rethinking conventions', but perhaps that's the best move for Nintendo – it is an age-old concept now, and as great as the games continue to be there's been little in the way of mixing up the formula. There was outrage, for example, when a joke from Eiji Aonuma led many to believe Link wasn't actually Link at all. All speculation, it turns out, but perhaps this was one of the strongest of examples on how careful Nintendo needs to be when approaching this new, fully-fledged iteration of *TLOZ* and the passion of its fans. The Wii U continues to struggle, and it needs a core – perhaps even predictable – title like *Zelda* to really bolster interest after the boost *Mario Kart 8* garnered.

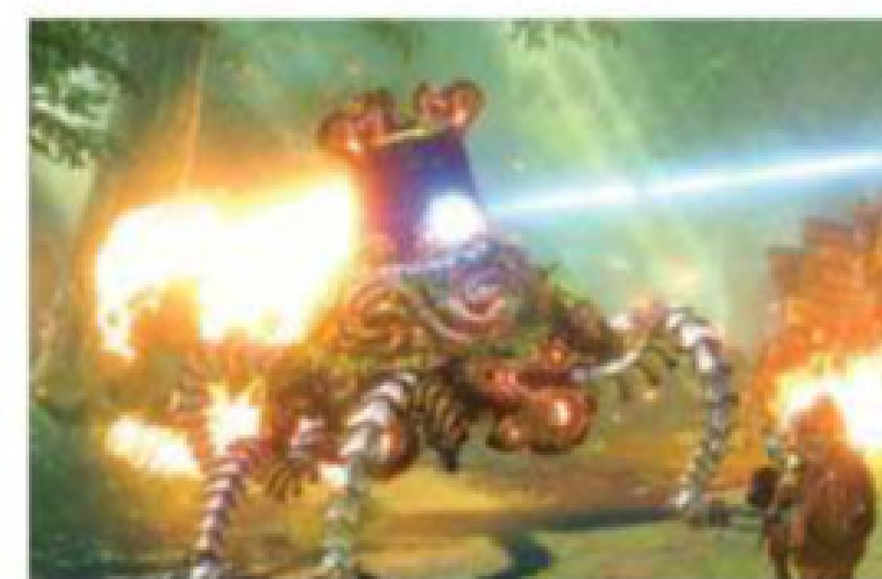
All the same there's not much to know of Link's latest outing – but there are some key factors to pay attention to. For one, Aonuma has revealed that its approach to open world is an attempt to harken back to the original *Legend Of Zelda*. Its free-to-explore Hyrule was a strong reason it became such a success, but the move to 3D has since burdened the franchise into more linear, interconnected environments. The key point is, then, that while *Ocarina Of Time*'s Hyrule Plains might have felt vast and exciting, it's only now that a true open world will return to the 3D entries. That's a thrilling idea for the Wii U's *Zelda* as it enables a sense of exploration rather than a particular, linear journey.

This time, however, Link might be a little more personable than before. Say nothing of his mute status – that's a convention that just isn't going to change – but perhaps there's more to read into Aonuma's comment regarding the main character of the reveal trailer. Speculation has it that Link could be more of an everyperson – the kind of character you'll impart your own personality onto, perhaps alluding to visual customisation or maybe even – dare we say it – narrative choices to be made. For one thing Aonuma himself has questioned what it means to create a *Legend Of Zelda* game – which traditions are necessary to make the franchise what it is? Does Zelda need to be a princess, for example? No, poses Aonuma. So there should be a sense of trepidation entering into the next *Zelda* game, but that's something Nintendo is keen to make the most of.

> "IT'S ONLY NOW THAT A TRUE OPEN WORLD WILL RETURN TO THE SERIES"

There's been much talk of Link's bow – which seems to be a focus of the combat seen so far. Here it shifts and adapts into new weapons, and will likely play a large part in traversing the world as well as fighting.





TO BE OR NOCT TO BE?

We're theorising that the story of *Final Fantasy XV* is based around Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – centring on themes of betrayal, inter-familial homicide and a persecuted prince. Protagonist Noctis also has an undisclosed relationship with Stella Nox Fleuret – a character that can 'see the expiring light of people's lives' much like Noct himself. We're expecting a dark game in *XV* – before moving on to *Kingdom Hearts 3*, ex-director Tetsuya Nomura already laced the game with his increasingly sombre personality, and new director Hajime Tabata seems to be keeping Nomura's dark dreams alive…

FINAL FANTASY XV

IS SQUARE ENIX'S MOST FAMOUS PROPERTY BACK ON THE RIGHT ROAD?

Format: PS4, Xbox One **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Square Enix
Developer: In-house **Release:** Q4 2015 **Players:** 1

WHETHER YOUR FAVOURITE moment in the *Final Fantasy* series has been piloting Cid's airship to the Northern Cave in *Final Fantasy VII*, taking Balamb Garden over the Trabian wastes in *Final Fantasy VIII*, guiding Tidus and co. through the Calm Lands in *X* or navigating the steppes of *XII* with Balthier and Fran, its safe to say the best moments in *Final Fantasy* gameplay come from the huge open plains the game gives you to play with – where optional bosses hide, where secret weapons beg to be unearthed, where Square Enix can show off the true scope of its vision, with impressive scale and acute attention to detail.

It's a relief to see *Final Fantasy XV* is taking us back to one of the best recurring tropes of the series – sending Noctis and his band of brothers out across open plains in one of the best-looking vehicles we've seen in the series. The world is completely open, and your exploration will be peppered with events that humanise and characterise your team so naturally, it creates an almost unbelievable contrast to the grounded fantasy world they're set in. This barbecue scene illustrating these pages is just *one* example of the intimate moments that will populate the game's main quest…

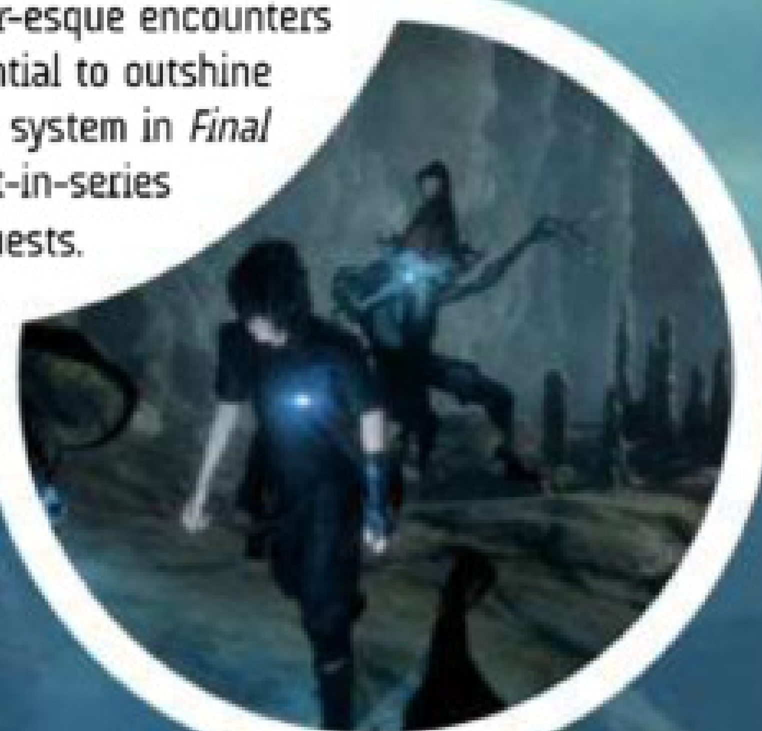


HUNTING AND GATHERING

When you're not kicking back and cooking up an evening meal, you'll be up against the likes of these spherical be-tusked beasts: there are no screen-shattering or random encounters going on here; the whole game is fluid. What you see in the world is what you can attack; this allows stealth mechanics to be incorporated, a new action-orientated battle system (with the series' strong RPG roots, don't worry) and dynamic team-mate responses to various events. Get knocked down, they'll help you back up, if an enemy's charging at you, they'll guard you… it's the most involved a *Final Fantasy* fight's ever looked.

PICK YOUR FIGHTS

We assume that huge creature chilling out in the middle of the plains is an Adamantoise – a staple *Final Fantasy* enemy. It's combatable, even in the extended demo coming early this year. But that doesn't mean you *should* face it – you can tell from your team's excitement as you pass by it that it won't be an easy battle, so we hope Square hasn't thrown this beast into all the promo material just as a gimmick – if the whole game is littered with *Monster Hunter*-esque encounters like this, it has the potential to outshine event the 'Mark Hunting' system in *Final Fantasy XII* for best-in-series elimination quests.





5 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT… FALLOUT 4

THE WAIT FOR THE WASTELAND CONTINUES

1. THREE YEARS OF DEVELOPMENT

As far as we're aware, development on a new Bethesda project, other than *Skyrim*, has been ongoing since early 2012. That would have given some of the team a break between shipping *Skyrim* and moving over to a new *Fallout* title, although it would likely have been early concepts only at that stage.

2. A BOSTON SETTING

Rumours abound that Boston, Massachusetts will be the setting for the next *Fallout*. It all started after reports that Bethesda researchers were looking at MiT. This ties nicely into some of the background story as The Institute is located in The Commonwealth, the new name for the Boston, Maryland region.

3. EVERYONE'S ON IT

Now that *Skyrim* DLC is complete, Bethesda's design teams should all be working on a new game. We imagine many might be working on new projects, but with the next-gen consoles in full flow, *Fallout* is the brand that the team is going to be putting its full weight behind.

4. THE HOAXES KEEP COMING

We've had fake websites and erroneous copyright filings to distract us and we wouldn't be surprised if even more *Fallout* hoax announcements manage to make their way to your eyes and ears in the coming months. Bethesda is keeping quiet for the time being.



5. RETURNING CHARACTERS

Ron Perlman said in an AMA on Reddit he doesn't have any game work coming up, but then he really only has one line. One character who may be returning is the radio host ThreeDog. Voice actor Erik Todd Dellums said in an interview that he would be returning after his appearance in *Fallout 3*.

2015 LEVELS UP

TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION

MANY THAT ARE FIRST SHALL BE LAST, AND THE LAST… FIRST

Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4 **Origin:** Sweden **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft: Massive, Red Storm, Reflections **Release:** Q4 2015 **Players:** 2+ (online)

THE SUCCESS OF *Destiny* has proved to be a wonderful litmus test for games like *The Division* – whose premise relies on the same foundations as Bungie's epic, albeit without the extravagant space-opera setting. Rather, *The Division* brings the idea of an asynchronous online world to a more domestic setting – a world where the USA fell in five days after a virus broke out on Black Friday.

In this world that's been torn apart by a virulent plague, Ubisoft is aiming to make you feel emotionally invested in the lives of people you'll come across. Playing in teams, enemy AI will attempt to sabotage the remains of a society that's already teetering on the edge of decay. Human-controlled enemies will be prowling the urban wonderland of Ubisoft Massive's imagining, too, but their impact and alignment have yet to be fully revealed. After seeing how *Destiny* disappointed those after innovative storytelling from the new wave of massively online console games, we're excited to see what Ubisoft can do: *Destiny* might have been divisive in its MMO hangovers, but *The Division* looks much more like the co-op action of a *Rainbow Six* game than it does a loot-'em-up… and that is incredibly promising.

An awful lot of effort has gone into making *The Division*'s urban warzones feel authentic – we've never seen such a detailed in-game city

TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

DO SWAT YOU GOTTA DO

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin:** Canada **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal **Release:** Q3 2015 **Players:** 10+

WE'RE USED TO playing online shooters where a couple of clips to the head is nothing to worry about, where hitting someone with a sticky grenade *might* kill them. *Rainbow Six* games have always tried to be a lot more realistic in their presentation of war – and *Siege* isn't keen on breaking this trend. Taking multiple and obvious cues from *Counter-Strike*, *Siege* sets teams of terrorists vs. teams of Rainbow agents, who are tasked with attempting to extract or kidnap hostages from various urban environments.

Teams are pre-assembled with different roles – you won't be facing five campers all loaded out with ghillie suits and snipers here, *Siege* makes you fit to the role you're given, whether that's a SWAT member with ballistic shied and pistol or terrorist with C4 and a shotgun. The entire game will have a heavy focus on close-quarters combat. This means cohesion and communication are a *must* – there's no room for lone wolves in a game where one rogue shotgunner can mean the difference between success and failure. *Siege* looks like it's taken all of the lessons *Counter-Strike* has taught gamers about co-op play and applied them to the Tom Clancy universe.



Players can vote on how they want to storm a building – whether you go in gung-ho or take a conservative approach is decided by a team vote

INDIES TO WATCH

STAR CITIZEN

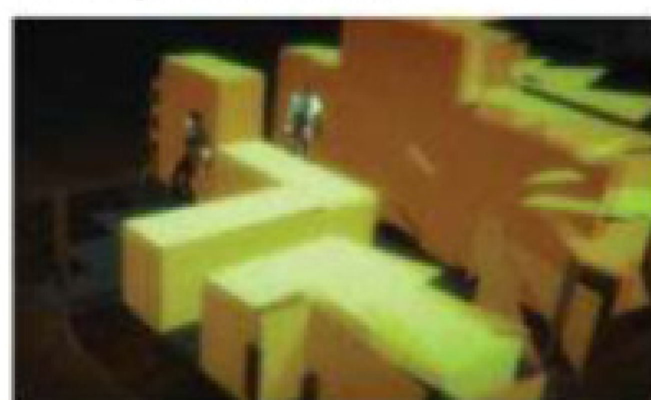
Developer: Cloud Imperium Games



■ As ambitious as *No Man's Sky* in scope but with the gameplay core of games like *Elite* and *Eve Online*, *Star Citizen* is the rising star of the Indie scene at the moment and looking set to blow peoples minds. Backed by crowdfunding and directed by one of the minds behind *Wing Commander*, this is a game with retro credentials and modern ideas.

VOLUME

Developer: Mike Bithell



■ From *Thomas Was Alone* to a 3D adventure and a modern twist on the *Robin Hood* tale, Mike Bithell is making something far more ambitious this time around. Andy Serkis has even been hired to play the game's villain, giving *Volume* even more legitimacy. The stealth gameplay is reminiscent of *Metal Gear Solid* albeit with more robbing the rich and giving to the poor.

BELOW

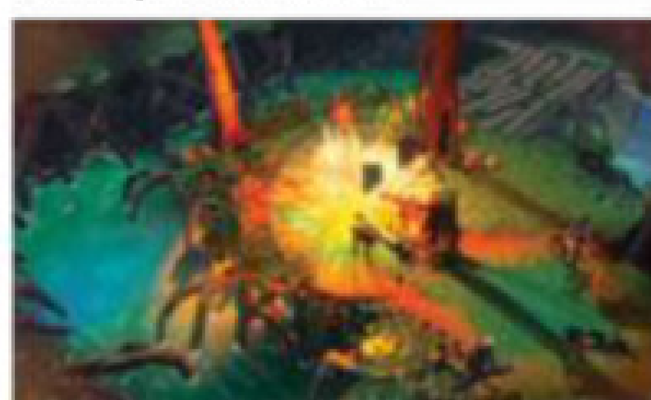
Developer: Capybara Games



■ Capybara has already kicked off this generation of consoles with the very fun *Super Time Force*, but now its going to punish us with roguelike *Below*. With a smart permadeath mechanic of finding your lost equipment where your ancestor fell, it promises tough dungeons and an unravelling mystery to solve. Plus, it's got a great watercolour style.

MASSIVE CHALICE

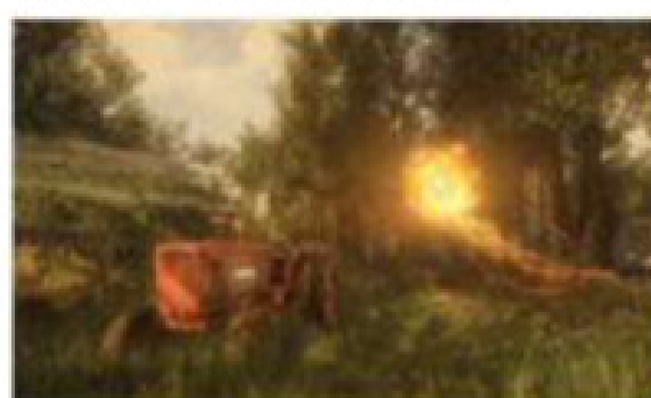
Developer: Double Fine



■ From the project leader who worked on Iron Brigade, *Massive Chalice* looks to be a great mix of *Fire Emblem* and *XCOM* gameplay with some serious depth. This will be a battle that takes place over centuries of in-game time, so managing resources and family trees will be as important as regular success on the battlefield.

EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

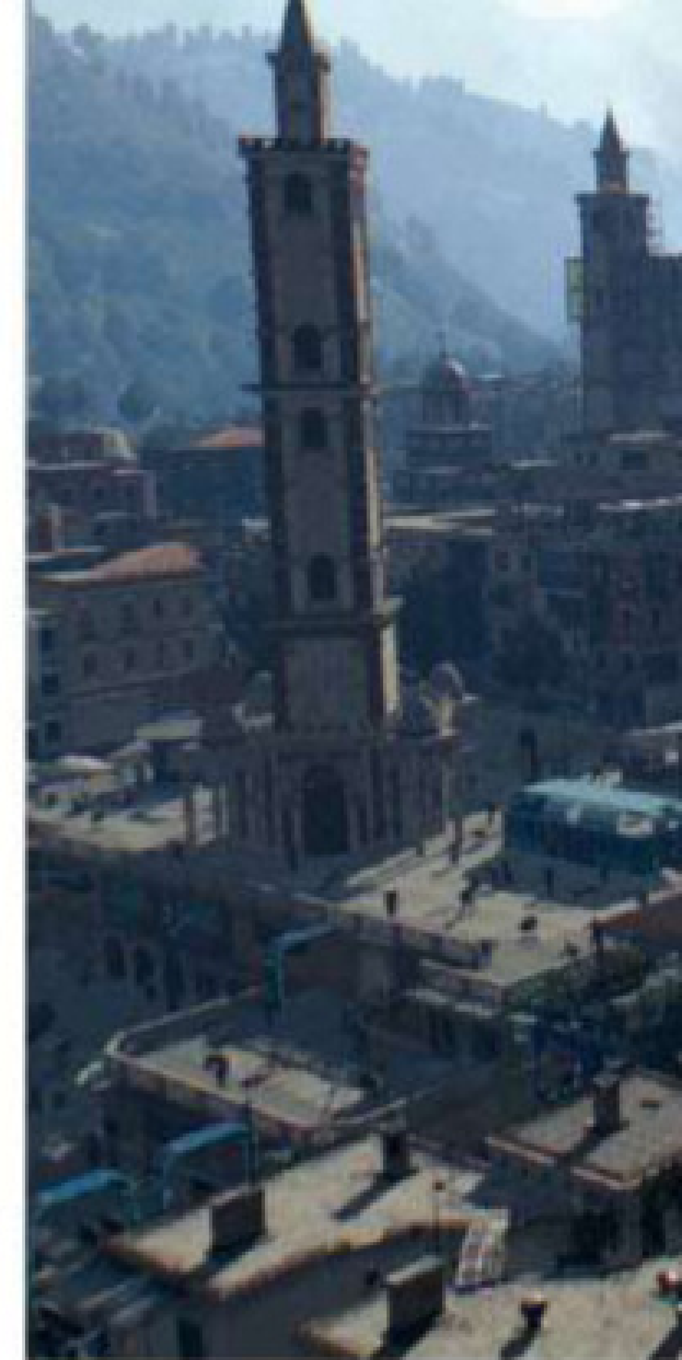
Developer: The Chinese Room

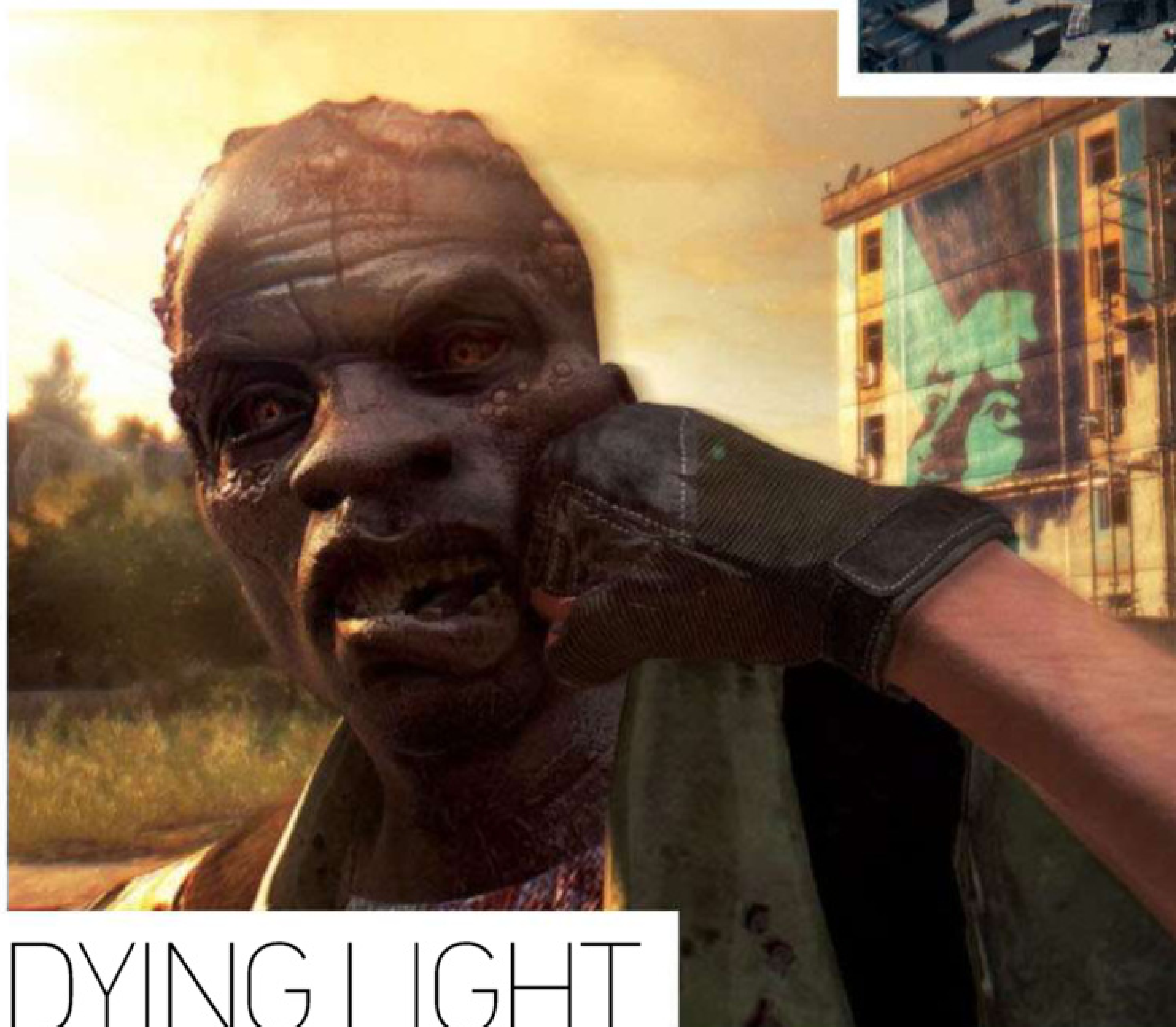


■ After the critical success of *Dear Esther* and *Amnesia*, The Chinese Room is going for a split narrative approach for its latest game, telling you the stories of six characters in a post-Rapture Shropshire. With what is left of humanity facing the apocalypse, the team's brand of stark realism with supernatural twists should make for a harrowing experience.



1





DYING LIGHT

FROM DUSK 'TIL DAWN OF THE DEAD

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** Poland **Publisher:** Warner Bros **Developer:** Techland **Release:** 30 January **Players:** 1-4

■ ACTION ADVENTURE ZOMBIE survival games have been in vogue since about the middle of last generation – thanks to the runaway success of *Call Of Duty*'s various zombie modes, *Left 4 Dead*, and various other titles – but little has really been done to emphasise the genre or push it much further than it's already come. We've got the studio that made *Left 4 Dead* moving onto asymmetrical multiplayer, we've got former *Spec Ops: The Line* developers coming into the undead fray in *Dead Island 2* (which focuses more on co-op anyway), so where does that leave the genre? Where will the genuinely new innovation come from? It's almost as if the industry's calling out for something totally fresh – a wholly new IP, perhaps? With that in mind, we spoke to Tymon Smektała – producer at Techland – about the studio's newest game, and the distance it's attempting to create between the humble beginnings of *Dead Island*.

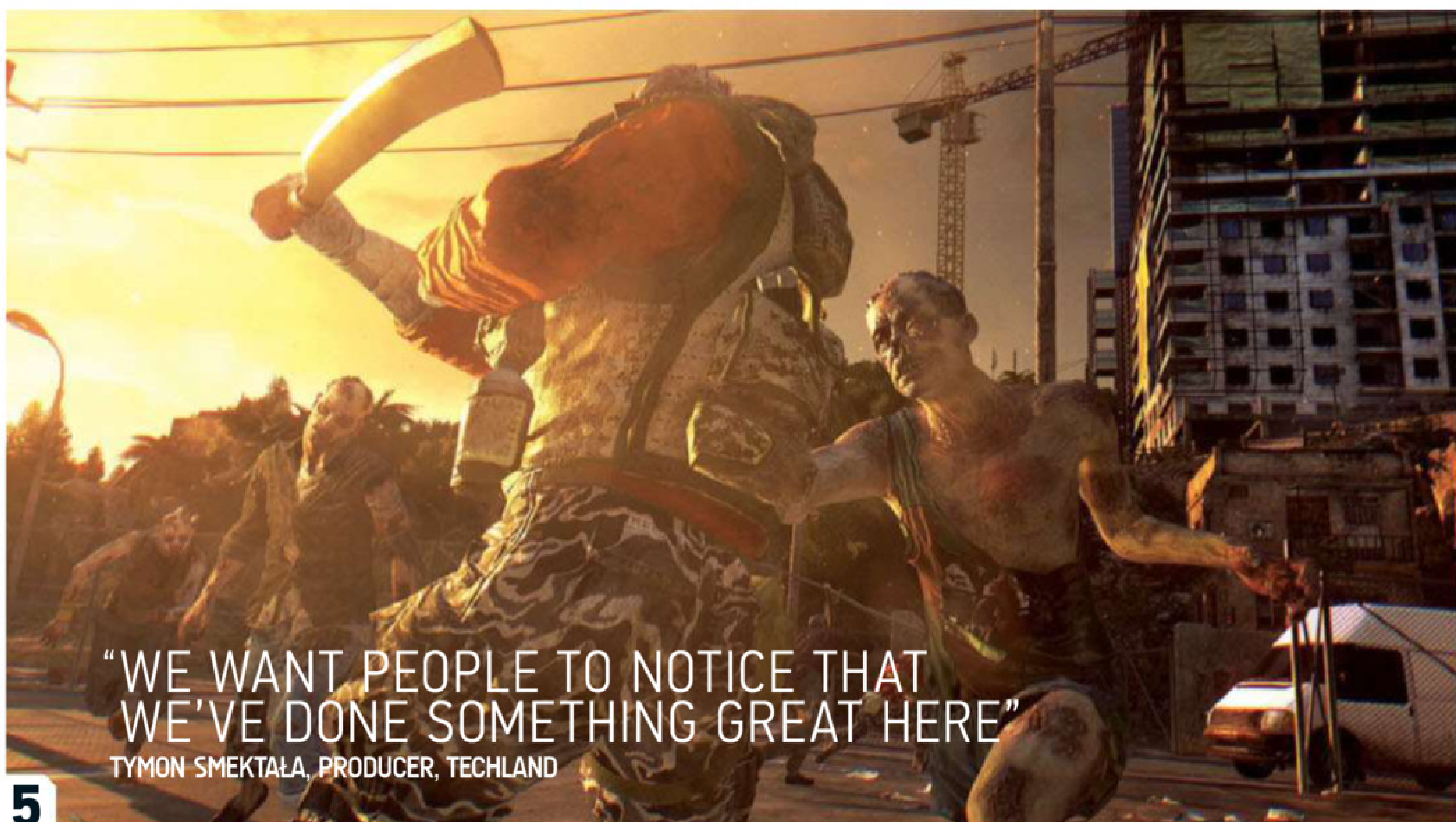
1 IT PLANS TO REDEFINE THE FPS GENRE...

"FOR ME, *Dying Light* isn't a zombie game – of course it has zombies in it, and shares a lot of elements with our previous games, but the defining element of *Dying Light* lies in the empowered mobility that we give to our players. Not only is that new in the zombie genre, but in the first-person games scene in general. The system we call 'natural movement' is a mechanic that allows you to traverse the game environment freely without any limits or any invisible barriers. That's the thing that sets us apart from other FPS games, other zombie games. We think it has a huge chance of redefining the FPS genre."









"WE WANT PEOPLE TO NOTICE THAT WE'VE DONE SOMETHING GREAT HERE"

TYMON SMEKTAŁA, PRODUCER, TECHLAND

2 MORE TITANFALL THAN MIRROR'S EDGE?

"IN *DYING Light*, you're in an open world: you can climb over any fence, jump from any building, go anywhere. I don't think it's fair to say we're making '*Mirror's Edge* with zombies' – we are extremely respectful to DICE, and it made a breakthrough game – but we're taking advantage of the power of [the Xbox One] and the almost limitless talent of our developers. We've got more in common with *Titanfall* or *Advanced Warfare* than *Mirror's Edge*; they try to make players move with greater freedom, and so do we. We don't have jetpacks, but we're still letting players go where they want."

3 IT WANTS TO DEFINE CURRENT-GEN…

"WE HAD to look at things like motion sickness, movement speed, camera speed, how you're *supposed* to see things from the first-person view. I'm incredibly proud to have been a part of this development team because I truly think we're doing something new here – I think *Dying Light* will be a game synonymous with next-gen gameplay and a benchmark for what this hardware can achieve.

"In a single *Mirror's Edge* level, from the top of my head, you have about 100 items you can interact with. At one point, in *Dying Light*, you had at least 50,000."

4 IT WANTS TO PUT TECHLAND ON THE TRIPLE-A MAP…

"I THINK I speak for the whole company when I say *Dying Light* is the biggest game for the company; we want the title to show the world that Techland is a triple-A developer, and that we're a studio that can play with the biggest names in the business. It is my belief that *Dying Light* is a fantastic product, and we took a lot of risks in pushing the game back and dropping the release on [Xbox 360 and PS3], but we knew it needed more polish if we wanted to prove to the world that we're as good as the big developers. We want people to notice that we've done something great here."

5 IT'S GOT A REAL STUNTMAN HELPING OUT WITH COMBAT…

"OUR LEAD DESIGNER Maciej Binkowski used to be a stuntman for many years and did all sorts of crazy things. He was at Techland during the *Dead Island* days, and he was the main source of information for how we animated how you *hit* things in our games. We also managed to get the advice of professional Krav Maga teachers who told us how we should animate bodies being hit by weapons, we had parkour professionals telling us how to present the first-person movements. We used not just our in-house knowledge, but went elsewhere too."

METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN

KOJIMA SHOWS US WHAT NEXT-GEN REALLY LOOKS LIKE

Format: Wii U **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** In-house **Release:** 2015 **Players:** 1-TBC

IT'S THE SMALL details that make *The Phantom Pain* such an exciting game. We've been playing Snake's 3D stealth adventures now for 16 odd years and we kind of know what to expect. *Ground Zeroes* was our teaser last year that there was more to come and now it's not so much the scope as the depth of gameplay mechanics and systems that has us very excited about *The Phantom Pain.*

For a start, Kojima appears to be embracing the kind of emergent, player-empowering moments that you would be more used to seeing in *Far Cry 4* than an *MGS* game. We're looking at an open world where you can travel and engage in side-missions as you see fit, where animals prowl and can attack NPCs or Snake at any moment, where resources can be found anywhere and your approach to missions is about more than whether you go non-lethal or not.

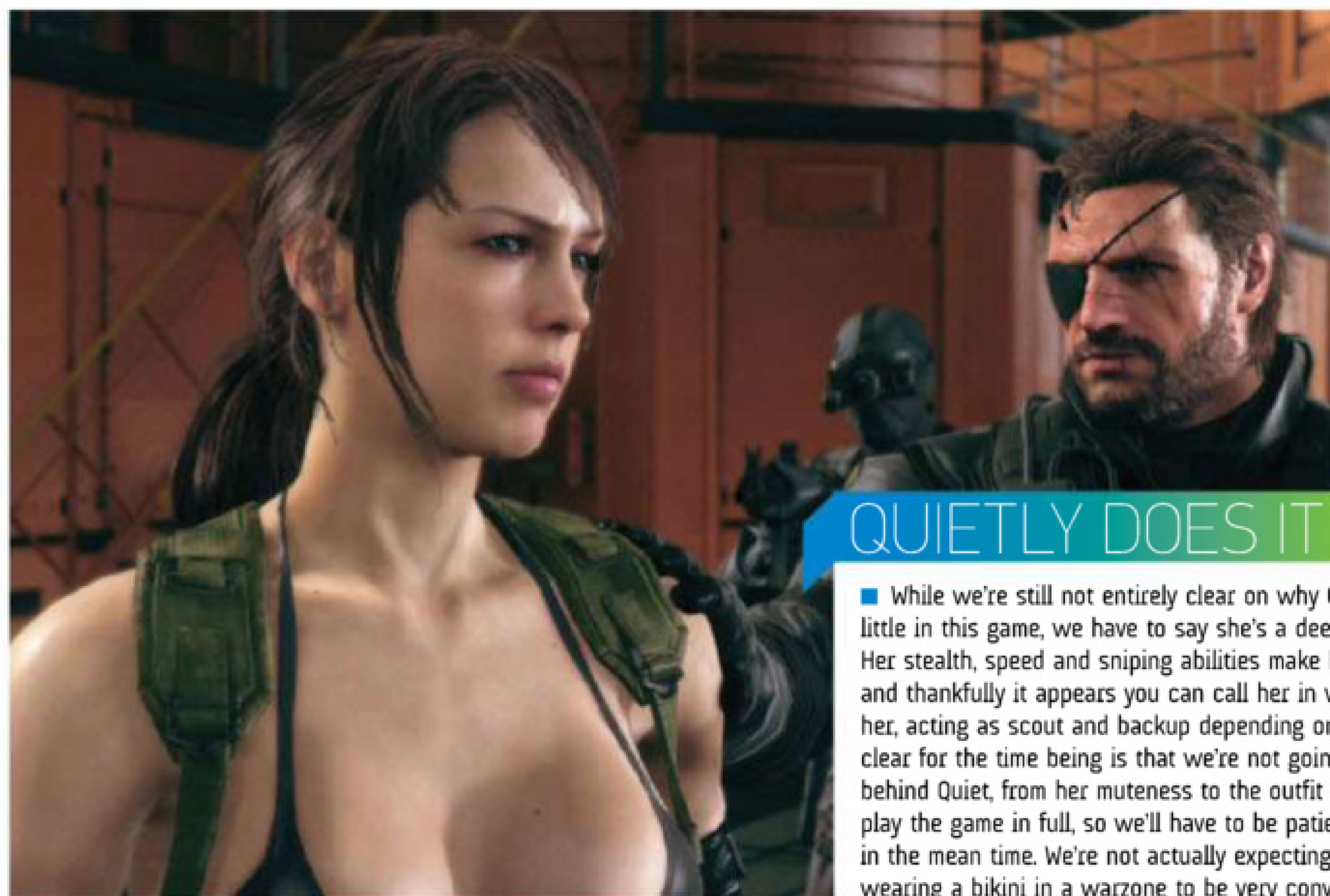
It's important to note though that Kojima recently confirmed that missions themselves will not be completely free roam. That is to say that they take place within defined areas and if you leave it's an automatic mission fail. From what we've seen though it doesn't appear to be too stringent. There's still plenty of open area to roam in these missions and you can choose the time of day you tackle them (although time limits may apply in some instances).

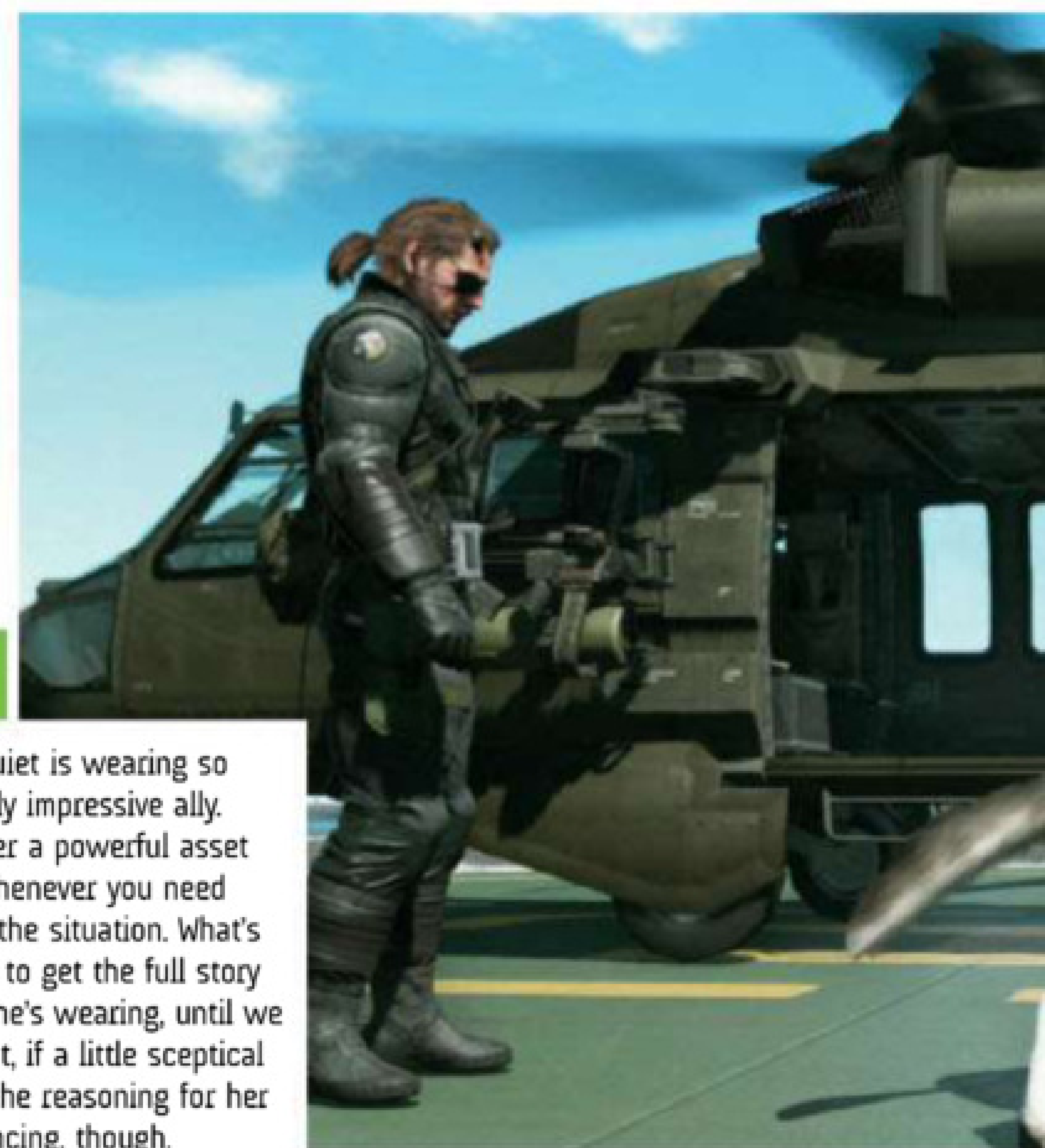
But it's still the small details that get us every time. For instance Snake's not as multilingual as he used to be, thanks to that chunk of shrapnel sticking out of his temple. If you capture and attempt to interrogate someone who doesn't speak a language Snake understands, you'll need an interpreter who does understand on your Mother Base to get the intel you want. This might well end up extending to researchers too and the kind of tech you can ultimately use on the base and in the field. This line of thinking opens up lots of new resource gathering and management options for the game.

The ability to suss out the skills and specialities of guards is another cool example, as it not only helps you figure out how best to take them down, but also lets you cherry-pick the best soldiers to join the Diamond Dogs. Likewise, a bio-sonar device makes finding wildlife in jungle areas much easier, all of which could prove handy back on the base. Basically, grabbing what you can with the



Below You can have a wolf companion in *The Phantom Pain*, which is bound to please fans of canine company in their videogames. Wildlife on the whole plays a big background role in the game and can be used to your advantage.





QUIETLY DOES IT

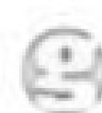
While we're still not entirely clear on why Quiet is wearing so little in this game, we have to say she's a deeply impressive ally. Her stealth, speed and sniping abilities make her a powerful asset and thankfully it appears you can call her in whenever you need her, acting as scout and backup depending on the situation. What's clear for the time being is that we're not going to get the full story behind Quiet, from her muteness to the outfit she's wearing, until we play the game in full, so we'll have to be patient, if a little sceptical in the mean time. We're not actually expecting the reasoning for her wearing a bikini in a warzone to be very convincing, though.

"THERE ARE SO MANY COMBINATIONS YOU CAN PLAY WITH TO CREATE AMAZING MOMENTS"

Above The Fox Engine is looking pretty spectacular in this game. With such wide expanses and variations in vegetation and terrain, we're seeing the best this engine can offer.

Fulton Recovery System seems like a smart plan, but there's so much more to those balloons than just abducting soldiers, jeeps and goats.

As we've had the pleasure of seeing, there are so many little interactions and combinations of abilities you can play with to create amazing moments in this game. Launching a jeep into a helicopter using the Fulton for instance is one potential piece of chaos you can instigate. You can even have Quiet snipe grenades in the air, knocking them into the path of enemy vehicles you might not otherwise be able to reach. There are so many small things revealed already and each just creates a dozen more potential ideas of ways you could use those abilities and tricks in new situations.

But despite similarities *The Phantom Pain* isn't trying to be a *Far Cry* or even a *GTA*-style open world experience. After seeing *Grand Theft Auto V* on PS4, Kojima reportedly said he felt 'depressed' after seeing how impressive Rockstar's world was on the new consoles. This is more of a sandbox than a living, breathing ecosystem, but where once that was something hinted at by *MGS* titles, this year it's the real deal. 

WII U'S NEXT WAVE

STAR FOX WII U

Developer: Nintendo Comprehensive



■ With a mixture of traditional control and using the Wii U GamePad screen as a cockpit view, the new *Star Fox* is one of those Nintendo games that could either make the technology relevant in an entirely new way or feel shoehorned to fit its console. We're pleased to see Fox get his wings back for this one, as it's been a while since we had a traditional *Star Fox* on consoles.

SPLATOON

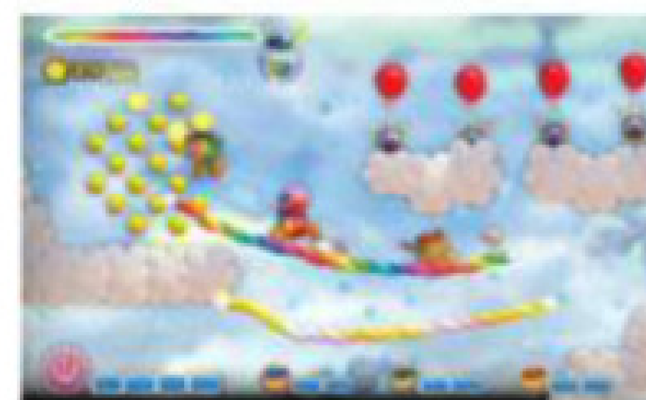
Developer: Nintendo EAD Group No. 2



■ This is the kind of child-proofed spin on a more grown-up genre that we've come to expect from Nintendo platforms, proving that violence isn't the only way to make something engaging. In this third-person shooter, using ink to paint the environment is as important as taking out enemies as your Inklings fast-travel between zones and paint the levels.

KIRBY AND THE RAINBOW PAINTBRUSH

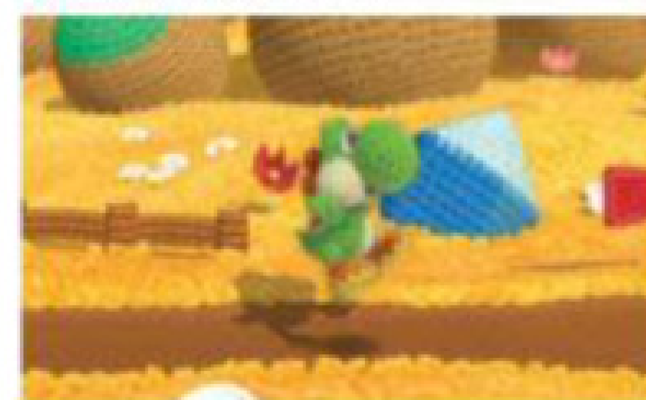
Developer: HAL Laboratory



■ It's hard to believe it's been a decade since the release of *Kirby's Canvas Curse* on DS, and perhaps more surprising that the gameplay wasn't revisited sooner. The Wii U is definitely the right platform for it, though, as you control a balled-up Kirby by drawing lines rather than pressing left, right and jump. It promises to be another colourful hit.

YOSHI'S WOOLLY WORLD

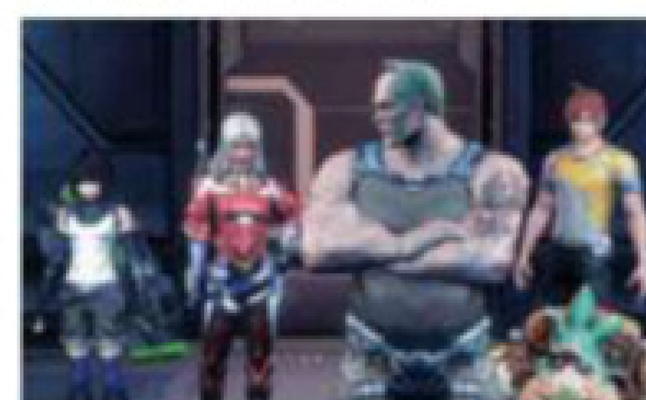
Developer: Good-Feel



■ Building on the art style of *Kirby's Epic Yarn*, the latest *Yoshi* adventure looks very different, but it adds some flair that's been missing from this sidekick's solo adventures. Co-op, though, is where we see this game delivering the most enjoyment as you team up to reveal hidden areas and take on challenges.

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES X

Developer: Monolith Soft



■ While Xbox One and PS4 must wait a while for their first proper Japanese RPGs, the Wii U is getting one of the most epic we've seen on a Nintendo platform for some time. *Xenoblade Chronicles X* is delivering massive battles, exploration and mechs as well as the crazy gelled hairstyles, sci-fi armour and odd little sidekicks we all demand from such experiences. Definitely one to watch.

2015 LEVELS UP



STEAM MACHINES

MORE THAN JUST HOT AIR

Manufacturers: Alienware, Gigabyte, Maingate, Origin PC, Zotac **Expected Release:** Autumn 2015

■ THE TERM STEAM Machine gets met with varying amounts of derision these days. Cooled by the lacklustre announcement – sorry, but Valve just isn't making the consoles itself – and then delayed into 2015, many will either have forgotten the impromptu march onto the living room by the *Half-Life* creator or simply lost interest. The latest generation from Sony and Microsoft are here, after all; the excitement has waned.

But in truth it's not really *about* the array of machines forged by the likes of Alienware and Gigabyte, but instead about the controller. And that Valve *is* making. The boxes themselves, as we already know, are an eclectic bunch, ranging from gorgeous to tacky. They are the functional side of the Steam Machine; it's the controller that we really need to be focusing on. It's been steadily worked on and adapted over the last year, and showcased at a handful of tech events. The most prominent change, perhaps, is the way the face buttons have shifted from aside the already-iconic circular trackpads to the more traditional diamond shape. Valve is experimenting with the addition of an analogue stick – in place of a D-Pad – to ease concerns that the trackpads alone were a little tricky to get used to. The triggers, too, have seen some work but in truth it's unlikely these will be their final form. It's an interesting approach to hardware design, though, taking the community-driven approach to software development as seen with Early Access, Kickstarter projects and even Unreal Engine and applying that to hardware to make a product that, ultimately, everyone can be happy with.

We started by thinking Valve's Steam Machines will be a threat to the console equilibrium because of the open nature of PCs and the flexibility of the software, but in truth it seems the real benefit will come from its evolving hardware. The real test will be whether they manage to appeal to the ease of use that console gamers have become so familiar with. There are still huge question marks over the process Valve is taking – should it not just create its own, unified Steam Machine first, at least as an alternative? – but if that controller ends up being as innovative as it is attempting to be, then perhaps we really will get *World Of Warcraft* on a console at last. 

■ Valve is taking a community-driven approach to hardware design: a crowd pleaser or waste of time?

MACHINES TO WATCH



ALIENWARE ALPHA

CPU: Intel i3 Haswell **GPU:** Custom 2GB Nvidia Maxwell-based card **RAM:** 4GB DDR3 **HDD:** 500GB SATA 3 **Price:** $549

■ ALIENWARE IS the name most gamers will recognise, even if they don't own a PC. Surprisingly, though, it seems the manufacturer is going against its own grain with the Steam Machine to build a machine that is very much entry-level hardware. It'll be good for the brand – which, despite the costs, is known for its quality – and though it's not the most powerful PC out there it'll certainly do enough to prove Steam Machines can work. Expect this to be one of the more popular.



DIGITAL STORM BOLT II

CPU: Intel i7 4770K **GPU:** GeForce GTX Titan **RAM:** 16GB DDR3 **HDD:** 2TB SATA3, 256MB solid state drive **Price:** $1600

■ THOUGH THIS MACHINE has already released – and therefore not technically a Steam Machine – it is compatible with the Steam controller and has the small form factor to rest by your TV. Digital Storm has experience with smaller form factor PCs and has managed to make a machine capable of powering high-end PC games without compromising on space. Whether we'll see an updated Bolt III sometime in 2015 will remain to be seen, but this would still suffice.



ORIGIN PC CHRONOS

CPU: Intel i5 4460 **GPU:** Nvidia 1GB GTX 750 **RAM:** 8GB DDR3 **HDD:** 500GB SATA 3 **Price:** From $1,260

■ ORIGIN PC'S STEAM Machine takes cues from the very thing that makes PCs viable gaming machines to this day with custom selected parts built by Origin PC, but put into a smaller form factor case. The specs we've chosen are the cheapest parts available, but you'd still be looking at a *very* capable PC all the same – albeit a not-so-cheap one. The benefit here is that there's even an option to run it in SLI, for a real powerhouse of a machine.

OVERWATCH

BLIZZARD BRINGS US A SHOOTER

Format: PC, Mac **Origin:** US **Publisher:** Blizzard Entertainment **Developer:** In-House **Release:** Q3 2015 **Players:** 1-6

IF WE'D BEEN asked to guess what Blizzard was going to do next, an FPS probably wouldn't have been our first choice. That's largely because first-person shooters don't seem very… Blizzard. Once you've seen *Overwatch*, though, it starts to look very much like the kind of game you'd expect to see from that studio. We're not talking so much about the colourful and cartoony art style – though that is something that is shared with the likes of *Warcraft* and *Hearthstone* – but the way that the game is meant to play. *Overwatch* is very much a class-based shooter, one that clearly takes influence from the MOBA and MMO genre in the way that it provides players with a range of characters to choose from that play in radically different ways. Characters – or 'heroes', in the game's parlance – aren't only specced towards defence, support and attack roles, but seem to play in completely different ways within those categories, with an array of bizarre and interesting abilities on show in the game's trailer. The approach Blizzard is taking to the first-person shooter is fresh and fascinating and, as such, we're eager to see how the game's genre-blending, six-on-six multiplayer action handles. We'll get a taste of that when the beta runs in 2015.

Hanzo appears to be a stealth-based character by virtue of his silent bow. He has an ability that enables him to track enemies through walls via sonar.

SILENT HILLS

PUTTING A DYNASTY BACK ON TRACK

Format: PS4 **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Konami **Developer:** Kojima Productions **Release:** 2015 **Players:** 1

WE'RE STILL NOT really in a position to know whether the terrifying teaser that was released for *Silent Hills, P.T.* will accurately represent the final game. After all, the series has traditionally used a third-person perspective, as opposed to the first-person view we saw in that demo, and with Norman Reedus on board, you'd imagine there's an intention to get some use out of his likeness.

The important thing about *P.T.* though, is not how it plays, the fact that it uses a first-person perspective, or if it signals a new direction. It's that it demonstrates that co-directors Hideo Kojima and Guillermo del Toro understand horror. More than that, they understand the unique brand of psychological horror that made the *Silent Hill* series great in its early days. That is to say, a horror that isn't reliant on jump scares, but instead induces a creeping sense of fear and unease that makes the game's world unpleasant to inhabit.

A recent *Silent Hills* concept trailer that took place in a house that seemed threatening in its sense of malleable irreality, coupled with the appearance of the kind of twisted creature, has only reinforced our conviction that Kojima and del Toro 'get' *Silent Hill*.

Despite the fact that it's just a corridor, this scene somehow exudes dread and that's indicative of Kojima Productions' skill.

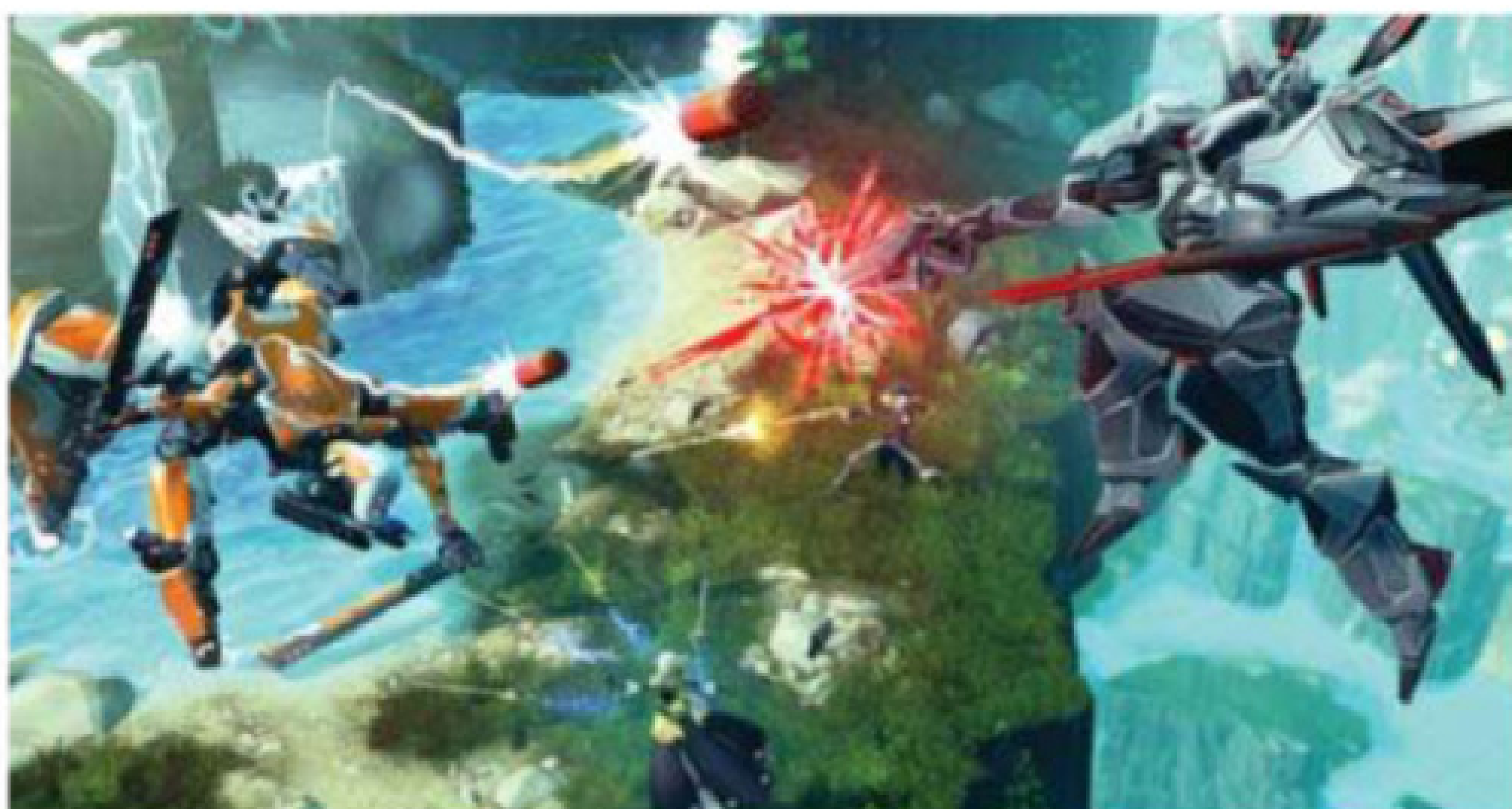
MORTAL KOMBAT X

A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE

Format: PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, PC **Origin:** USA
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: NetherRealm Studios **Genre:** Fighting
Release: 14 April 2015 **Players:** 1-2

"GET OVER HERE!" shouts Scorpion as he launches his (in)famous spear straight into Sub-Zero's skull. He yanks the chain and the cryomancer stumbles into melee range. With a few grunts and kicks, Scorpion takes him down. Sub-Zero wobbles in place, ready to be finished. Scorpion doesn't hesitate, and cuts open a hole in the cold one's chest, into which drops a beating heart. Not content, Scorpion puts all his weight into a sword, and slices Sub-Zero's face clean off, so all that's left is a little tongue flapping around inside a half-exposed jaw.

And that's just one example of the ultra-violence making its way into *Mortal Kombat X*. You've also got four new characters bringing their own flavour of violence, as well as another four veterans to add to the perpetual Scorpion/Sub-Zero feud. The four-armed Goro, the lightning God Raiden, the bloodthirsty Kano and the necromancer Quan Chi are all confirmed to reappear, too, and while the full roster won't quite match what we saw in *Mortal Kombat 9*, the fact each fighter has three wildly different styles to fight in more than makes up for it. X-Ray moves and the super bar makes a return, and animation is generally sped up to give combat a greater sense of pace and rhythm.





The work the studio has done on *Borderlands* seems to have deeply ingrained how important colour is in making a game visually appealing.

BATTLEBORN

MO' GUNS, MO' MOBA

Format: PC, Xbox One, PS4 **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** 2K **Developer:** Gearbox Software **Release:** Q3 2015 **Players:** 5-10 (online)

THE RAMPANT SUCCESS of *Borderlands* proved that Gearbox Software knows what it's doing with both the FPS genre and distinct art direction. Where *Borderlands* fused the loot systems of MMO games with the twitch-based skill required of the FPS, *Battleborn* plans to fuse the class-based elements you'd find in the likes of *Team Fortress* with its familiar co-op playstyle.

But the easiest point of comparison isn't *Team Fortress*, *Destiny* or even *Borderlands* itself; Gearbox's newest effort is more similar to *League Of Legends*. The game has structured itself around the MOBA template, but introduces some key elements that are quite different: for example, there are NPCs populating the map, enemy structures to be taken out and – of course – it's in first-person.

The variety offered by *Battleborn*'s myriad heroes also deserves a special mention – the upcoming *Evolve* from Turtle Rock prides itself on how each class complements the other, but the scope on offer from *Battleborn* defies belief: from melee focused hitters to snipers to archers to heavies, there's a character suited to however you play. Just think of how even *Borderlands* was. This is going to be good.

BREAK IT DOWN

■ *Street Fighter V* will feature destructible environments – the neon signs that illuminate this Chinatown arena get knocked off their scaffolds when Chun-Li launches Ryu at one point during this bout, and when she knocks him out at the end of the match, we see the *Street Fighter* mascot fly through the door of a Chinese restaurant. Whether or not this has any actual bearing in the battles remains to be seen, but it brings a new dimension to the fights regardless.



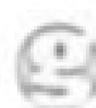
STREET FIGHTER V

MORE PROOF THAT RYU'S HADOKEN IS DOWNRIGHT FIERCE

Format: PS4, PC **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** In-house **Release:** TBA 2015 **Players:** 1-2

■ IN SUMMER 2013, Capcom's producer and long-time *Street Fighter* boss revealed Capcom didn't directly have the budget to develop and release a new *Street Fighter* game. Fast-forward a year and a half and Capcom announces a brand-new *Street Fighter* game (not just another *Street Fighter IV Ultra Super Redux Edition*) – albeit it with Sony console exclusivity, releasing alongside PC with cross-platform connectivity.

Sony approached Capcom with an offer – stating that if the developer wanted the budget to produce a new *Street Fighter*, they could partner up with the hardware giant and even use the expertise of Sony's in-house PS4 engineers. The result? A fighting game built from the ground up on the PS4, intentionally designed to allow console players to fight PC players, intentionally designed to extract as much power as possible from Sony's little black box. The game looks stupendous, and seems to mix up the status quo we got used to over the four iterations of *Street Fighter IV* quite a lot…





FULL OF ENERGY

■ The gameplay we've seen so far seems to suggest *Street Fighter V* will feature a new kind of mechanic that removes Focus moves (thankfully) and introduces a charge attack – reminiscent of the S-Groove charging moves you could do in *Capcom Vs. SNK 2*. Each character seems to have their own take on this, from Ryu's electoral charge, to Chun Li's aura-based meditation.

STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

Where *Street Fighter IV* focused on an ink-brush aesthetic in its art direction, *Street Fighter V* seems to be deviating onto a more realistic route. Granted: the game still isn't as grounded in 'reality' as *Tekken* or *Dead Or Alive*, but the move away from the watery inky style of the game's predecessor certainly works, especially when running at 60fps on the PS4. Interestingly, when characters perform EX moves or certain Supers, the inky style remains. We wonder why...

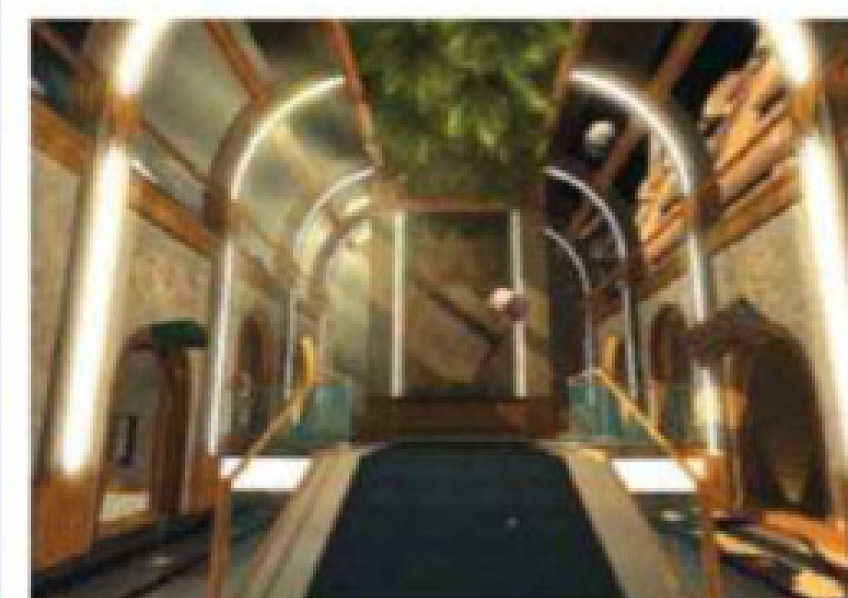


TACOMA

FULLBRIGHT DECIDES TO LEAVE HOME

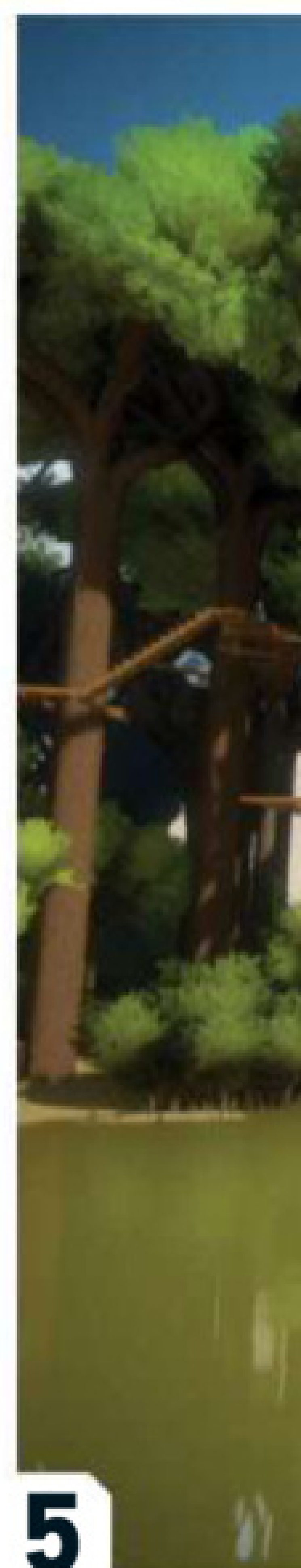
DEVELOPER OF 2013's dark horse hit *Gone Home* announced its newest game, *Tacoma*, will move away from the intimately domestic setting of its breakout hit and travel instead to a 'Lunar Transfer Station' replacing the non-verbal, environmental-only storytelling of the studio's first game with a more directed experience that relies on aural exposition. The hints we've seen of the game so far point us towards another female protagonist – something that was very well realised in *Gone Home* – and no doubt the story beats will incorporate this into the narrative as a focus. We can still expect to explore and drink in the rich detail Fullbright has already become known for in the orbital station, and the setting in itself is immediately reminiscent of one of the best gaming cities made to date: *BioShock*'s Rapture – the sci-fi inspired art deco architecture has sold us on the game straight away.











THE WITNESS

THERE IS NO TRUTH, THERE IS ONLY PERCEPTION

Format: PC, iOS, PS4 **Origin:** America **Publisher:** Thekla, Inc.
Developer: In-house **Release:** Q1 2015 **Players:** 1

YOU'RE STRANDED ON an island – water-locked on every side. In the middle of this landmass you find yourself on, there's a mountain. It sticks out of the ground, monolithic, forming a geological epicentre the whole game revolves around. There are ten areas on the island, each of them containing a gold turret, hidden behind a selection of puzzles.

To get to the centre of the island – to find out what you're doing there, and more importantly to find out how to leave – you need to activate at least seven of the ten turrets and make them face that looming mountain at the centre of the map. The game comes from megastar Jonathan Blow (most well-known for his breakout hit, *Braid*) so expect to see some unique ideas and mechanics fleshing out the uninhabited island, and likely some kind of subtly horrific premise – the island is probably a metaphor for earth, and the fact no-one's on it means there's been some terrible nuclear apocalypse or something. Here are five things we know about *The Witness* for certain, though...

1 IT'S CENTRED AROUND A MYSTERIOUS 'MAGIC MOMENT'...

BEFORE *THE Witness* came into being as a game in its own right, Blow had been experimenting with a variety of other game concepts, one of which involved leading players up to a 'magic moment' – something that would fundamentally alter the player's experience of the game. That element was taken from the proto-game Blow was working on and reworked to fit into *The Witness*, though information on specifically what the moment *is* remains elusive, likely due to Blow's insistence on keeping the gameplay experience as spoiler-free as possible.

2 IT'S AN INCREDIBLY OPEN WORLD...

FROM THE second you leave the intro of *The Witness*, the game promises to leave you to your own devices. The only vague path you'll find through the game takes the form of a series of totally optional audio logs, left by previous inhabitants of the island. Blow stated he wanted this feeling of isolation to be kept intact to give the player a sense of 'loneliness in a beautiful place'. Once again, it appears that Blow is looking to integrate a broader theme much more closely to gameplay mechanics than we might typically see from the genre. It's got modern-gothic written all over it and builds nicely on *Braid*.

3 4

"THE WITNESS WILL BE THE FIRST 'PORTAL-ESQUE' PUZZLE GAME RELEASED ON CURRENT-GEN"

3 IT DOESN'T WANT TO REWARD YOU FOR PROGRESSING...

DURING DEVELOPMENT, Blow toyed with the idea of removing trophies and achievements completely, so as not to give away any elements that would seem to reward the player for any progress they might (or might not) be making. The game's nebulous story has also been constructed to intentionally give you *no clue* if you're heading in the right direction at any given time. Blow wants you to saunter through the world he's created and absorb it all, with the traditional idea of progression in games the last thing on your mind as you explore.

4 IT'S GOING TO BE FIENDISH...

WHEN YOU come upon a puzzle-heavy zone, don't expect on-screen prompts and dialogue boxes telling you what to do. Head up to a wall and see a panel? Maybe you can interact with it, maybe you can't. There's no 'X' popping up to let you know, it's trial and error. Thing is, once you think you've mastered the game's visual language, Blow will change things up – that same textured panel can no longer be interacted with, or it can only be tilted, rather than moved wholly. Think *Myst*, but more abstract, and you're some way to being on the right lines.

5 IT COULDN'T BE ACHIEVED ON LAST-GEN...

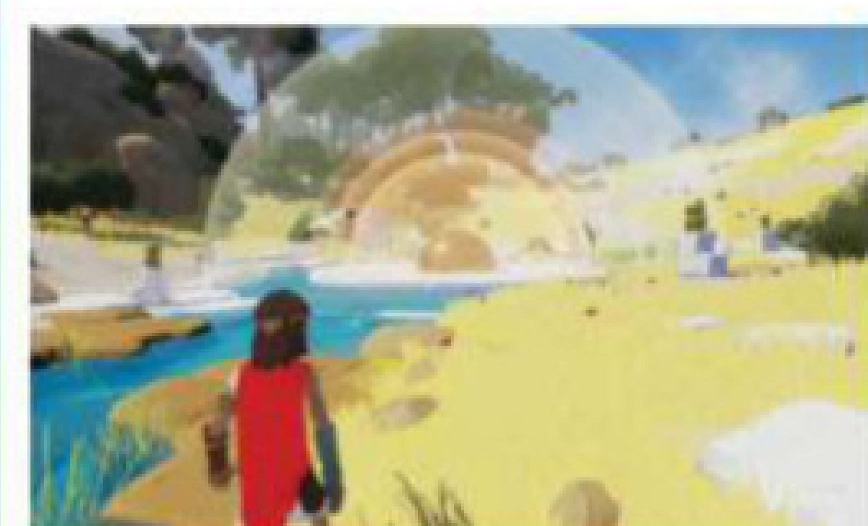
BLOW INITIALLY started development for the game on Xbox 360 and PS3, but releases for these games were scrapped when Blow decided the system specifications were 'too low'. Whether this is because the whole open world operates in one concurrent zone is uncertain – a condensed open world like that requires more RAM than a game that breaks its world off into different areas. Regardless, this means *The Witness* will be the first 'Portal-esque' puzzle game released on current-gen, and that's worth getting excited about.

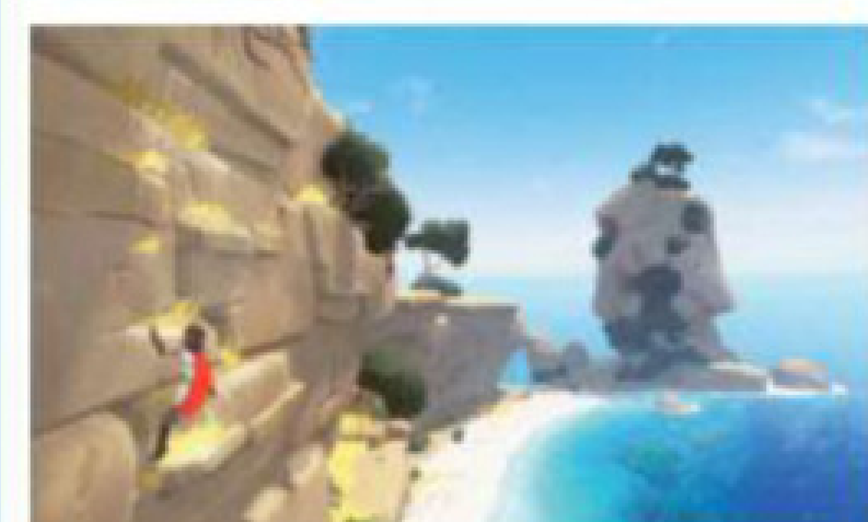
RIME

TEQUILA MAKES ME HAPPY

From the developers of 2012's *Deadlight* comes a game far more colourful and upbeat than the survival-horror epic that preceded it. *Rime* is an action-adventure game designed specifically for the PlayStation 4 – taking advantage of a day/night cycle to make puzzles more dynamic: certain areas are inaccessible unless a certain shadow falls over them, or unless a shaft of light hits a stone that'll unlock an area. The game's creative director has cited the works of Salvador Dali and Giorgio de Chirico as influences on the game's style, as well as Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* as loose influences on the game's non-verbal narrative.

Playing as a silent boy, you must find a way off the island you've been confined to, while simultaneously trying to escape a curse that's been laid upon you. The art direction and plot falls somewhere between *Ico* and *Journey* – the prize here isn't finding a way off the island, it's finding out about the island in the first place. *Rime* is a project driven by personal passions and inspirations, and its fluidity in switching from macro to micro is fascinating.







QUANTUM BREAK A THING OF THE PAST?

Format: Xbox One **Origin:** Finland **Publisher:** Microsoft Studios **Developer:** Remedy **Release:** Q3 2015 **Players:** 1

WITH MICROSOFT SHUTTERING the division responsible for creating unique TV content for Xbox One, *Quantum Break*'s formula of mixing gameplay with live action TV seems desperately out of date before it's even been released. It's a product that's already been and gone, a vision that's long been discarded. For that reason, we're not confident about the blending of game and TV, but, this is still a game, after all, so let's not write that aspect of it off just yet.

When it comes to playing *Quantum Break*, combat is focused on third-person cover shooting, the twist being that the game's three main characters have access to time-based powers that give them an edge in combat, allowing them to temporarily slow time to a crawl, for example, while still being able to move around normally within it. Things look to get interesting when enemies with similar time manipulation abilities join the fray, leading to some aesthetically and hopefully, mechanically interesting battles.

While we don't deny that the whole TV/game conflation has made us a bit sceptical, it's worth noting that Remedy Studios is a developer that's done interesting things in the past from both a mechanical and narrative perspective, both in the *Max Payne* and *Alan Wake* series in particular. For that reason alone, this is a game that deserves to catch a break.

The game still looks visually impressive, despite the fact that it was originally slated to release in 2014.

MARIO MAKER

PIPE DREAMS

Format: Wii U **Origin:** Japan **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** In-house **Release:** Q2 2015 **Players:** 1



Mario Maker lets you choose between classic *Mario* visuals or the style seen in the Wii U *Super Mario* instalment.



TO SAY THAT the mechanics of *Mario* are sound would be a colossal understatement. Consequently, giving people a tool like *Mario Maker* that allows them to create their own levels seems like a no-brainer, because it's clear that the potential is there to create some really special things. Given that this is a tool more than it is a game, we suspect *Mario Maker* is going to appeal to a very specific type of audience – the kind of people that whittled away hours tinkering with *LittleBigPlanet* levels, for example. On that front, we've had a bit of hands-on time with *Mario Maker* and can confirm that it's simple and intuitive to get going; tap on a pipe, drag and drop it over there, place a couple of platforms, whack down a Goomba and you're away.

But what about those of us who aren't thrilled by the idea of creating our own levels? Well, that depends on the answers to a couple of questions. Will Nintendo curate created content to ensure that we can find the gold among the mountains of trash that will inevitably exist? Will internet-shy Nintendo even make it easy to share created levels? If the answers are yes, *Mario Maker* could still be one for those that prefer simply to play.



CRACKDOWN

WELCOME BACK TO THE AGENCY

Format: Xbox One **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer:** Cloudgine **Release:** Q4 2015 **Players:** 1-4

MICROSOFT'S TEASE OF the return of *Crackdown* and the reassuring chime of an agility orb will have brought a smile to the face of most early Xbox 360 adopters. While the lure of the *Halo 3* multiplayer beta was the primary reason for many to grab a copy of Realtime Worlds' superpowered cop sandbox, it was the open design and smartly conceived Achievements that kept players from trading their copies in. What we've seen so far has given us a glimpse of what Microsoft is hoping to achieve with this new title, with the help of original game creator Dave Jones' new company Cloudgine.

You see Cloudgine is primarily a cloud platform development team, not a design team, so its involvement is likely to be largely on the tech and processing side of things. A tech demo by Microsoft from last year showing how frame-rates can be supported using cloud processing gave clues as to what this could mean. Phil Spencer, head of Xbox, actually confirmed the demo was an early prototype for *Crackdown*'s return. Massive destruction, cloud processing backing it up and at least four-player co-op are all looking likely at the moment. And those lovely agility orbs of course.



HELLBLADE

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Format: PS4 **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Ninja Theory **Developer:** In-House **Release:** Q4 2015 **Players:** 1

Senua will be fighting enemies both human and inhuman on her journey as it appears to shift from more familiar terrain to otherworldly areas.



HELLBLADE IS ALREADY looking like one hell of a game. Drawing from Ninja Theory's experience with cinematic game-making through *Heavenly Sword* and *Enslaved*, and then working closely with Capcom for the much more responsive, gameplay-focused *DmC*, the Cambridge-based studio has a lot to build on. *Hellblade* is promising to be a complementary mixture of these two approaches. The instant action of *DmC* married to the more considered pacing and story telling of Ninja Theory's earlier work. A good example of this is something as simple as the tight, over-the-shoulder camera angle *Hellblade* will be using. Sticking tight to our protagonist Senua, the camera won't be floating around like it did in *Heavenly Sword* or as free as it was in *DmC*. One comparison that Ninja Theory has made in its development diaries is to *God Hand*, suggesting something closer to a fighter combat style could be expected, even though it's going to look like traditional melee combat. The mass brawls of previous titles are giving way to focused bouts for Senua's skills to be showcased, and the team is being really open about its process this time, with plenty of dev diaries and assets drops to keep fans informed.



■ The game will feature dynamic day/night cycles, as well as cyclical weather effects, seasons and dedicated AI for each animal – including the pictured mammoths!



BEFORE

THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

Format: PC, Mac **Origin:** UK **Publisher:** Facepunch Studios **Developer:** In-house **Release:** Q3 2015 **Players:** TBA

■ FROM THE MIND behind *Rust* and *Garry's Mod* comes *Before* – a game about humans, their tribal nature and the simple but perpetual struggle humanity faced before we got to where we are now. Seemingly riding the wave of this current vogue for games all about survivalism, *Before*'s main task is simply to endure – to live and prosper and perhaps one day found a city, to etch your place in history into stone somewhere that matters.

To do this, you'll have to keep your tribe safe: harvesting and foraging for food on a daily basis, moving from base to base as encampments deteriorate or get set upon by wolves. You'll have to protect your young – fending off not just wild animals, but also that which is utterly beyond your control: the weather. But survival comes with troubles of its own: should your tribe thrive and grow, power struggles will begin to show – human nature will take hold, and hierarchies will form, allegiances will be made. *Before* could morph from a game about survivalism into a micro-chronicle of human history and tribalism.

It all sounds *very* ambitious, and after the lukewarm reception *Rust* achieved, we're cautious about getting too excited about *Before*. But the work in progress is so far looking stunning – each of the mentioned mechanics has its own specifically designed place in the Unity engine, and there are plenty more besides. If Facepunch hasn't bitten off more than it could chew, this might be the *Spore* of survival games.



THE BANNER SAGA 2

VIKINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC **Origin:** USA **Publisher:** Versus Evil **Developer:** Stoic **Release:** Q3 2015 **Players:** 1

■ STOIC IS A three-man team responsible for the original *Banner Saga* – a game that deconstructed how tactical RPGs work, implementing interesting moral choices alongside a reward/punishment system that was as unpredictable as it was enjoyable. The second game in the series promises to be mechanically identical to the first – something that might cause cynicism, but we think the 'If it isn't broken, don't fix it' approach to development is something a lot of studios could learn from. The story of the sequel, however, is up for modification – and according to Stoic artist Arnie Jorgensen, these narrative elements will likely be tied quite closely to existing gameplay functions, adding yet another layer of depth to the already intricate mechanics that knit together the unique Nordic realm *The Banner Saga* makes its home. Stoic promises the new combat scenarios won't change the gameplay that much, but will instead offer a little more variety in certain areas of enemy engagement (something we thought was lacking in the first game). With *The Banner Saga 2*, the ex-BioWare development team plans to bring the emotive RPG series to next-gen consoles, and with the decent budget Stoic secured from the massive sales of the first game, we hope we're not disappointed.

■ The pedigree at Stoic is clear for all to see – graduating from BioWare, the team has a clear vision.



2015

EVENTS | TOURNAMENTS | ANNIVERSARIES | GAME RELEASE DATES

JANUARY

- 2 Jan games™ 156
- 6-10 Jan CES 2015 (Las Vegas, NV)
- 9-11 Jan Smite World Championship (Atlanta, GA)
- 11 Jan Resident Evil 4 (10th Anniversary)
- 20 Jan Saints Row: Gat Out Of Hell (Multi)
- 23-25 Jan PAX South (San Antonio, TX)
- 23-25 Jan Global Game Jam
- 23-25 Jan X Games Counter-Strike: Global
- 27 Jan Dying Light (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

FEBRUARY

- 5 Feb games™ 157
- 10 Feb Vagrant Story (15th Anniversary) BioWare founded 20 years ago this month
- 13-15 Feb IndieCade East 2015 (New York, NY)
- 17 Feb Total War: Attila (PC)
- 17 Feb Dead Or Alive 5: Last Round (Multi)
- 20 Feb The Order: 1886 (PS4)

MARCH

- 1 Mar Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening (10th Anniversary)
- 3 Mar games™ 158
- 3 Mar Screamride (Xbox One, 360)
- 2-6 Mar Game Developers Conference 2015 (San Francisco, CA)
- 4 Mar Launch of the PlayStation 2 15 years today
- 6-8 Mar PAX East (Boston, MA)
- 11 Mar Chrono Trigger (20th Anniversary)
- 12 Mar British Academy Game Awards (London, UK)
- 12-14 Mar EGX Rezzed 2015 (London, UK)
- 17 Mar Project Cars (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- 22 Mar God Of War (10th Anniversary)
- 24 Mar Bloodborne (PS4)
- 26 Mar games™ 159

APRIL

- 3-5 Apr WonderCon Anaheim 2015 (Anaheim, CA)
- 3-6 Apr Insomnia 54 Gaming Festival (Coventry, UK)
- 12 Apr Jade Empire (10th Anniversary)
- 14 Apr Mortal Kombat X (Multi)
- 19 Apr Psychonauts (10th Anniversary)
- 23 Apr games™ 160
- 25 26 Apr Dreamhack Bucharest 2015 (Bucharest, Rumania)
- 27 Apr The Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask (15th Anniversary)

MAY

- 3 May Forza Motorsport (10th Anniversary)
- 8-10 May DreamHack France 2015 (TBA, France)
- 19 May The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- 21 May games™ 161
- 22 May Perfect Dark (15th Anniversary)
- 22-24 May MCM London Comic Con (London, UK)

JUNE

- 2 Jun Batman: Arkham Knight (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- 13-16 Jun DreamHack Summer 2015 (Jönköping, Sweden)
- 16-18 Jun E3 2015 (Los Angeles, CA)
- 18 Jun games™ 162
- 26 Jun Deus Ex (15th Anniversary)
- 29 Jun Jet Set Radio (15th Anniversary)

■ GAME RELEASE ETA ■ GAMES™

Day	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
1						
2					CALL OF DUTY ETA	
3						3 Dec games™ 168
4						
5		5-9 Aug Gamescom 2015 (Cologne, Germany)			5 Nov games™ 167	
6				6 Oct American McGee's Alice (15th Anniversary)		
7	7 Jul Killer7 (10th Anniversary)	METAL GEAR SOLID V ETA				
8				8 Oct games™ 165	8 Nov Guitar Hero (10th Anniversary)	
9	9-12 Jul Comic-Con International San Diego 2015 (San Diego, CA)					
10			10 Sept games™ 164	HALO 5 ETA	ASSASSIN'S CREED ETA	
11						
12						
13		13 Aug games™ 164		UNCHARTED 4 ETA		
14						
15						
16	16 Jul games™ 163				RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER ETA	
17			17-20 Sep Tokyo Game Show 2015 (Tokyo, Japan)	17 Oct F.E.A.R. (10th Anniversary)		
18				18 Oct Duck Hunt (30th Anniversary); 18 Oct Nintendo Entertainment System launches in US 30 years ago		
19					19 Nov Hitman: Codename 47 (15th Anniversary)	
20					20 Nov Banjo-Tooie (15th Anniversary)	
21	21 Jul VirtualBoy (20th Anniversary)		THE DIVISION ETA		21 Nov Super Mario World (25th Anniversary); 21 Nov F-Zero (25th Anniversary); 21 Nov SNES released in Japan (25th Anniversary)	21 Dec Phantasy Star Online (15th Anniversary) Worms released this month 20 years ago
22		22 Aug Nintendogs (10th Anniversary); 22 Aug Advanced Wars Dual Strike (10th Anniversary)			22 Nov Xbox 360 released worldwide (10th Anniversary)	
23	23-26 Jul QuakeCon 2015 (Dallas, TX)					
24			24-27 Sep EGX 2015 (Birmingham, UK)	24-25 Oct Dreamhack Masters Bucharest 2015 (Bucharest, Rumania)		
25					FIFA ETA	
26	26 Jul R.O.B. released by Nintendo (30th Anniversary)	26-27 Aug PAX Dev (Seattle, WA)			26-29 Nov DreamHack Winter 2015 (Jönköping, Sweden)	
27						
28		28-31 Aug PAX Prime (Seattle, WA)				
29						
30				30-1 Oct PAX Aus (Melbourne, Australia)		
31		31 Aug Command & Conquer (20th Anniversary)				

BEST OF BRITISH



SOME OF THE TOP CREATIVE MINDS IN THE UK GAMES INDUSTRY GIVE THEIR VERDICT ON THE BIG ISSUES IN GAMING AND TELL US WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A DEVELOPER IN BRITAIN TODAY

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU TO BE A BRITISH GAME DEVELOPER?



You know, Britain feels like one of the founders of the games industry. We had the BBC Micro, we had the ZX Spectrum, and we had more games magazines than the rest of Europe put together at one time. There was this statistic going around for a long time that a third of all games have British input. So, I think there's a great heritage and a great tradition in making games.

PETER MOLYNEUX OBE, 22CANS FOUNDER



It's a great honour to be part of the British game development family. We have a fantastic tradition of combining groundbreaking technology with a distinct art style and a believable narrative: *Broken Sword*, *GTA*, *Tomb Raider*, *Lemmings*, *LittleBigPlanet*, do we need to go on? As a collective of talented islanders, we develop fun games to play which touch people's lives.

JAMES MEGRETTON, SUMO DIGITAL COMMUNITY COORDINATOR



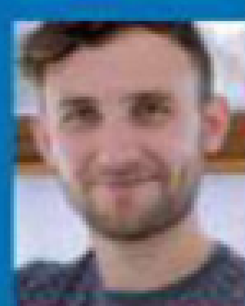
I think that the coolest part of being a British game developer for me, the part that I think I most directly benefitted from, is the cultural awareness in Britain for videogames. Way beyond other European countries and especially way, way, way beyond America, the cultural institutions of this country actually understand videogames. So you have things like the BAFTAs celebrating and supporting upcoming game developers, you have events like GameCity that kind of grow out of universities and grow out of the academic side.

MIKE BITHELL, CREATOR OF THOMAS WAS ALONE



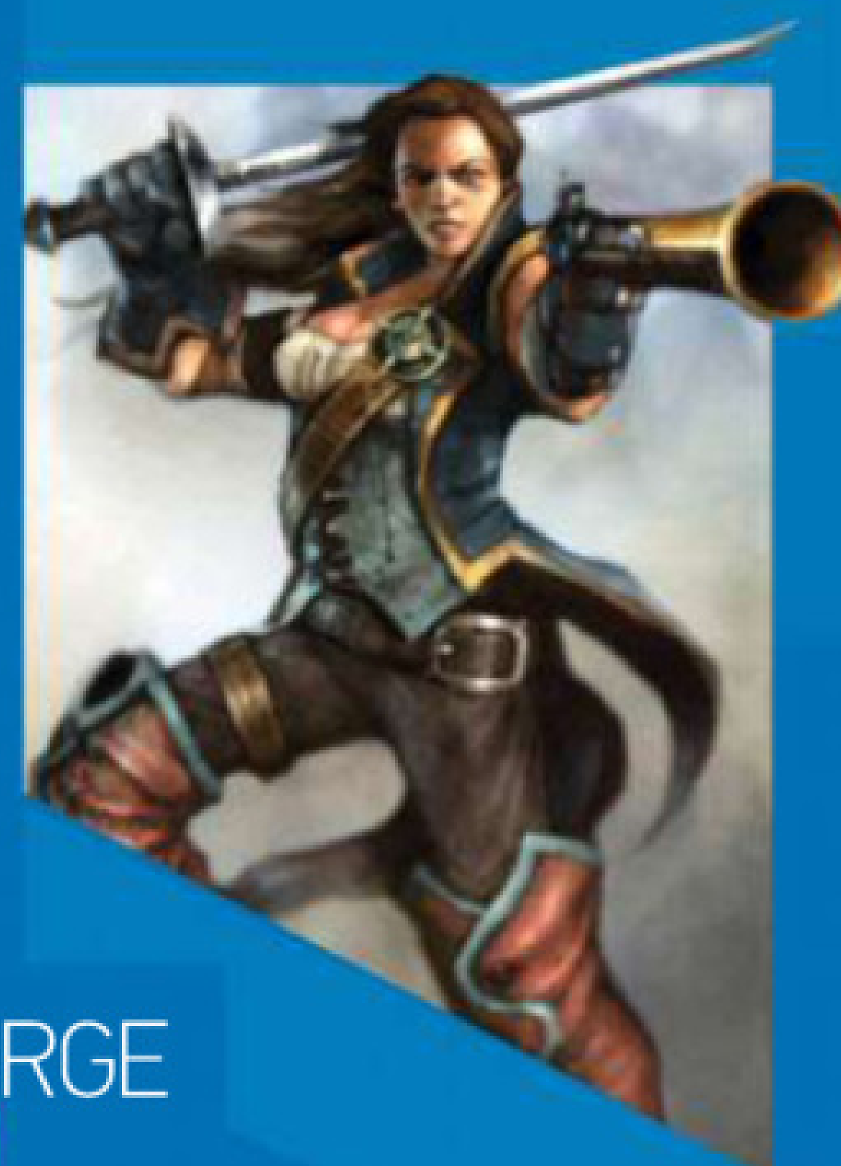
I think historically it means a certain type of game, with a unique sense of humour and a smaller scale. Nowadays I think indie gaming means that it's harder to feel an overarching sense of identity in the UK gaming scene. It's just too diverse, which is awesome!

ALASDAIR EVANS, SENIOR PRODUCER AT LAUGHING JACKAL



Being a British developer is about mixing cultures, styles and approaches from all across to world to make amazing experiences. Britain is a special place for development because as nation we welcome the diversity that the world has to offer. It's because of this that British developers can attract the best talent. There is a rebellious streak in British developers, an inherent urge to do things differently. It's this that drives British innovation in games.

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, NINJA THEORY PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER



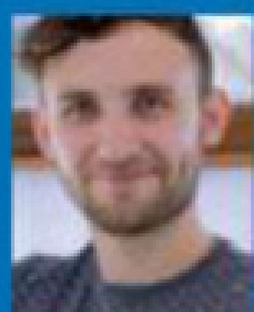
"THERE IS A REBELLIOUS STREAK IN BRITISH DEVELOPERS, AN INHERENT URGE TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY"



It means a great deal. It doesn't only just mean everything, but it also means, at the same time, completely nothing. It means what it means, basically. I'm pretty confident in that. But also I leave room for doubt.

WILLIAM PUGH, DESIGNER/WRITER ON THE STANLEY PARABLE

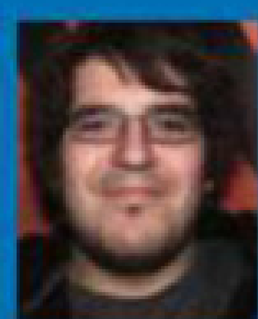
NEW TECH TO WATCH



Virtual reality. I'm completely sold. As an industry we've only just started to scratch the surface of what is possible with Virtual reality. I'm excited to see how the technology combined with the rampant creativity of the dev community manifests. I'm convinced that Virtual reality will be the next evolutionary step for gaming – as big as the step from 2D to 3D gaming. The immersion that VR offers will allow developers to bring players so much closer to their characters and worlds.

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, NINJA THEORY PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER





Whilst it might sound a cliché, it has to be VR. We've come along since the Eighties. Recent experiences with *Alien: Isolation* made me realise the extent to which suspense could be built up combining the technology and tightly scripted gameplay. The luge VR demo on Project Morpheus was also a thrill, so I'm excited at what else is to come.

JAMES MEGRETTON, SUMO DIGITAL COMMUNITY COORDINATOR



I like VR. I think VR is cool. I'm waiting to see if it's something that's adopted by human beings, because I know I love it. How many VR kits do I have now? I think at the peak I had four, and I think some of them I've passed onto other people now, but I'm a big VR nut, and I love the guys at Oculus. They've been great, and given me a lot of interesting stuff to play with. Yeah, I'm waiting to see. I really want to see the first consumer one. I want to see how people who aren't nerd developers get on with it.

MIKE BITHELL, CREATOR OF THOMAS WAS ALONE

> "I WANT TO SEE HOW PEOPLE WHO AREN'T NERD DEVELOPERS GET ON WITH IT"



I bet everyone's said Oculus Rift, because that's the thing that people think of. Can I say Gear VR? Or whatever VR product Valve was working on. Specifically not Oculus.

Let me think of this properly now. I wouldn't have anything specific, but I like the idea of iPads and iPhones getting more sensory stuff in and more facets for people to interact with them, because something I'm interested in is doing party games on iPhone and iPad, or some kind of social media weird thing like Fingle or Friendstrap but different, my take on it.

WILLIAM PUGH, DESIGNER/WRITER ON THE STANLEY PARABLE





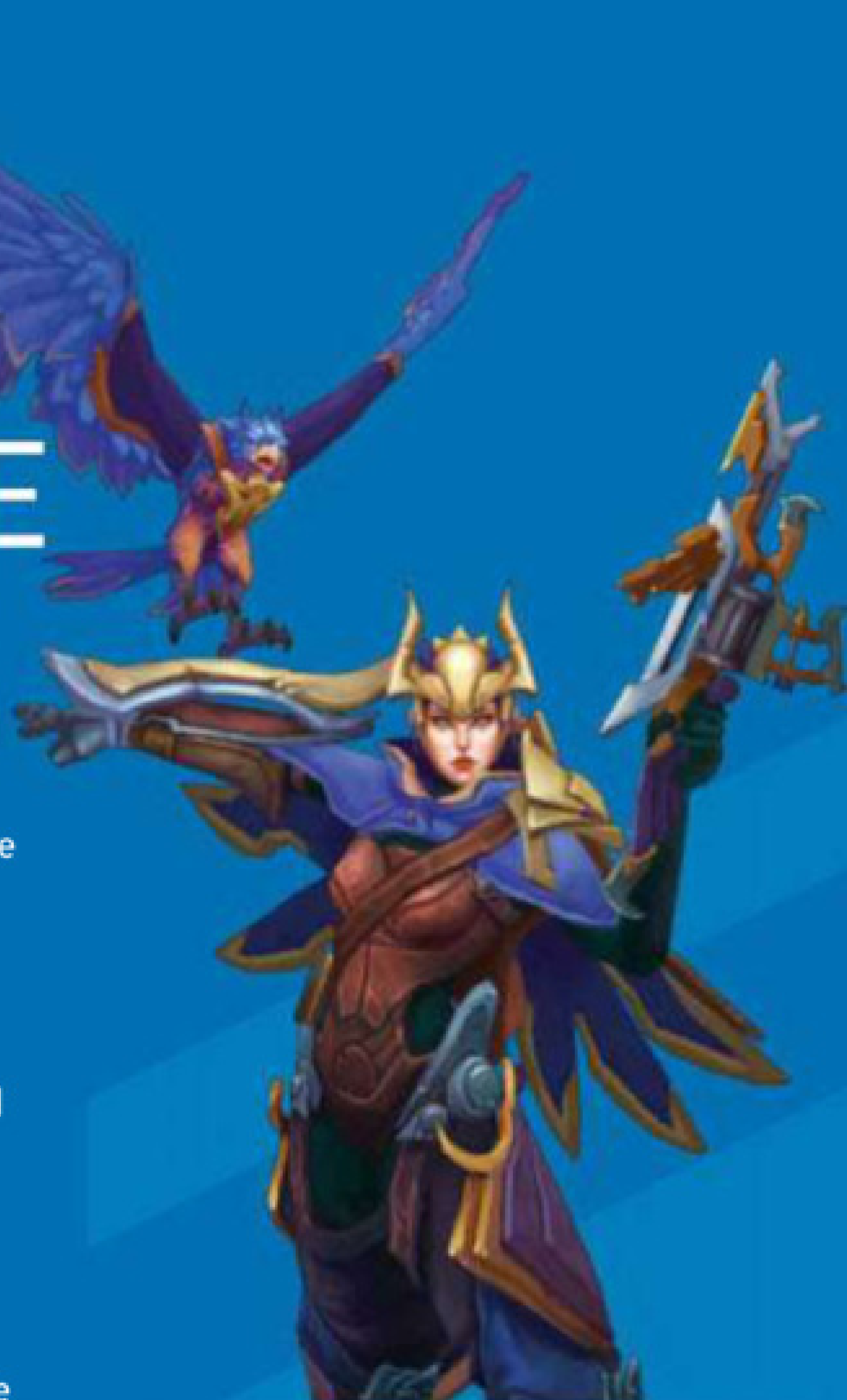
What's happening on the PC is astounding. The PC is such a strong platform, with some people saying up to 400 million people a day are playing games on PC if you take it globally, so that's very exciting. There's a hell of a lot happening, but over the last 30 years a hell of a lot has happened every year. This is just another version of all that excitement.

PETER MOLYNEUX OBE, 22CANS FOUNDER





EXCITING GAME TRENDS





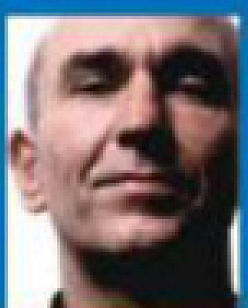
The rise of indie games is something I am thrilled about as we're seeing so many diverse and interesting ideas instead of more and more of the same stuff we get from the mega-publishers year after year. I certainly enjoy the big budget franchises but indie gaming has seen some all-new concepts gain mega success and show that people do enjoy different experiences. That's got to be good news for everyone.

ALASDAIR EVANS, SENIOR PRODUCER AT LAUGHING JACKAL



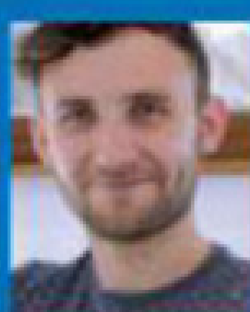
The most interesting part of indie is the people who are coming to indie from outside perspectives, outside skills, and they're using tools, things like Twine, things like Unity and Game Maker, which streamline a lot of the process, and they're making stuff that I can't imagine, and that's really exciting to me. The stuff that doesn't exist in the minds of the kinds of people who have had the big indie hits, because we're still making genre work, we're still working in other people's shadows, and that's fine, and that's a valid way of working, and I have no guilt about making those kinds of games, but I don't think it's the most interesting stuff in the field.

MIKE BITHELL, CREATOR OF THOMAS WAS ALONE



I think how monetisation works and how we pay for games, how we can play games before paying any money is evolving. I can understand if gamers especially turn around and say 'Free-to-play is rubbish', but actually if you take in *League Of Legends* and you take in *Dota* and you think about what's happening on PC and how addictive that is, and *Team Fortress 2*, you start to realise that this is still evolving. I think the utopia that we're heading for is that you play a game and you never spend any money on it unless you get a huge amount of value out of it.

PETER MOLYNEUX OBE, 22CANS FOUNDER



We're in the middle of a digital revolution in the games industry, which is exciting for developers like Ninja Theory. It means we can create games that aren't locked into the $60 retail and as a result don't need to sell upwards of 5m units to be deemed a success. We can now create smaller, lower-priced games that strive for the highest quality but that can be made for smaller audiences. This approach will lead to more creativity and diversity across the gaming industry.

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, NINJA THEORY PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER



There was a phase where everyone started to deconstruct, like, 'Is this game an art game or is it a game, or is it this or that?' and people were judging things. I quite enjoy now how we're starting to leave that behind. It's hard to make an argument that games aren't art, because it's kind of, 'Yeah, they are a mode of self expression.' It's a breath of fresh air that we can start to talk about games in terms of good art and bad art, rather than, 'Oh, are they art? What does it mean? What does art mean?' That's such a stupid conversation to be having constantly.

WILLIAM PUGH, DESIGNER/WRITER ON THE STANLEY PARABLE





> "I THINK THE UTOPIA THAT WE'RE HEADING FOR IS THAT YOU PLAY A GAME AND YOU NEVER SPEND ANY MONEY ON IT UNLESS YOU GET A HUGE AMOUNT OF VALUE OUT OF IT"

GAMING INFLUENCES

The British titles that inspired our panel



Probably the biggest British games in terms of my personal awareness in the last decade or two were *GoldenEye*, *Perfect Dark* and the *TimeSplitters* series. Further back, early home computer games of the Eighties were the ones that really lit the spark in me in the first place.

ALASDAIR EVANS



For me personally, the *TimeSplitters* franchise by Free Radical. It encapsulated everything you could ever need in a great party shooter; taking inspiration from pop culture, classic splitscreen multiplayer, over the top weapons, timeless (no pun intended) moments.

JAMES MEGRETTON



I kind of owe my career to Blitz Games, which was one of the big studios, which was founded by the Oliver twins, who came up with Dizzy the Egg and their own *Robin Hood* game, which they reminded me of the other day – that I'm basically stealing their idea from 30 years ago.

MIKE BITHELL



Developers like Rocksteady and Rockstar North make sure the bar in continually set high and working alongside them keeps you on your toes. There are highly creative independent games being made in Britain. Developers like Hello Games and Mike Bithell are ripping up the rule book and helping to tread a new path for independent development and self-publishing. They inspire me to help nurture an environment where highly creative, independent developers can thrive.

DOMINIC MATTHEWS



There are a ton of them. Everything from *Elite* to *Paradroid* to *Rainbow Island*. I think a lot of the early games especially were the ones that shaped my passion for being in the industry.

PETER MOLYNEUX



Banjo-Kazooie, *Banjo-Tooie*, all the games by Rare. Loved them as a child. 'Inspired me', was it? It kind of takes a lot to inspire. Not to be reductive, but 'inspire' is a grand word. There are influential games. Very few games have full-blown inspired. I'd say *Journey* was an inspire-y type thing, but then it kind of of just goes down the gradient of, 'Oh, that was really cool,' or, 'Oh yeah, that was alright.'

WILLIAM PUGH

2014 SUCCESS STORIES

The games that have shown the UK's strength this last year

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

■ Given a new lease of life on next-gen systems, the Scottish-developed satire of American lifestyles and entertainment has flown off the shelves again, breaking even more records. The additions of first-person camera and new hidden secrets were also impressive additions to an already fantastically engaging game.

DRIVECLUB

■ Having graduated from making arcade racers in the form of *MotorStorm*, Evolution Studios looked to lead the charge for online racing simulators for this generation. It was a little hit and miss on launch, but it's now finding its feet, not to mention enticing a rabid audience of racer fans looking for intense competition.

THE LEGO MOVIE VIDEOGAME/LEGO BATMAN 3/LEGO HOBBIT

■ TT Games simply can't help but make hits. With three massive releases this year, all the bases have been covered and once again its managed to squeeze new life and humour out of a concept that in other hands would have lost its verse many years ago. The *Lego* games are a testament to British humour.

PES 2015

■ Long in the shadow of *FIFA*, for many this year's *PES* is finally the year that the classic series takes its rightful place on the thrown, and it was with the help of the London-based PES Productions team. This was a collaboration between Japan and the UK to help bring us the best *Pro Evo* in years.

OLLIOLLI

■ Recently announced to be launching on Xbox One, Wii U and 3DS, *OlliOlli* has been a small phenomenon, creating the kind of addictive, just one more go, gameplay that made *Joe Danger* or *Tony Hawk's* such a delight. *OlliOlli* blew people away and it's still got a sequel in development.

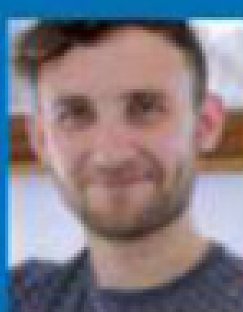
FORZA HORIZON 2

■ With Leamington Spa's Playground Games leading development on Xbox One and Sumo Digital picking Xbox 360 duties from Sheffield, this was a fully British triumph. The open-world action racer surpassed our expectations with some great, intense action and brilliantly executed online functionality.

ALIEN: ISOLATION

■ It was the franchise we all thought had been killed for good, but Creative Assembly had the inspiration and drive to make *Alien* work and by going back to Ridley Scott's original movie it found the formula to make it happen. A gripping, terrifying and fully immersive experience, *Isolation* was one of the games of the year.

THE FUTURE OF F2P



Many F2P games rely on aggressive tactics for their revenue, unlocking game progress for payment. There is nothing particularly wrong with this model if the player understands this upfront, but I believe developers will start to change their approach. Rather than blocking players, they will work to engage players on a deeper level. Make them fall in love with their game and then offer ways for players to spend money as a sign of their affection for it. I can see more developers striving for the situation where players are spending money in their F2P game because they really want to, rather than because they feel they've been made to in order to continue playing.

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, NINJA THEORY PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER





I don't think that paying full price for a game is going to go away, I just think that there are different ways of spending your money on a game. Some games are perfectly attuned to free-to-play, some are perfectly attuned to the full-price model. It's so tempting to judge a whole technique on just a few titles.

In the early days of free to play I think it was a little bit harsh, and monetised the addictive quality of a game to a point where it was maybe not as delightful as it should be. Free-to-play is not going anywhere and I suspect that now we're all digitally connected, the idea of playing a game before you pay for it seems like something that should be really good for gamers.

PETER MOLYNEUX OBE, 22CANS FOUNDER

> "I THINK A LOT OF THE WAYS IT'S BEEN DONE UP 'TIL NOW HAVE BEEN INHERENTLY EVIL"



The smartest thing Microsoft could do would be to make *Minecraft* free to play and then add in micro transactions. That would be, 'Look, I'm sorry, Microsoft, for the [next] answer, but here's a peace offering. Make *Minecraft* free to play. Kill the Apple versions and the PS4 versions. Make it a really closed system. Add monetisation for mods.'

That would be brilliant, because they can't be accused of being evil then, because they've opened *Minecraft* – the beautiful tool for saving humanity and teaching kids how to count and speak and walk – they'll have opened that up to everybody, only they'll have done one better because they'll have allowed poor horrible little nerdy mod makers [to use it], of which I was one (but I grew out of that very quickly).

Yeah, the more I walk through this, despite it being a joke, it's actually a very smart idea, because they'd appear very good while making more money. As long as the mods get made, and the creators can get a bit of cash, no one will care that Microsoft will take, like, a 95% cut of all the mods bought. That would be great. Do that.

WILLIAM PUGH, DESIGNER/WRITER ON THE STANLEY PARABLE





I think those saying that it will die out or those saying it will be the only way we buy videogames in five years should pay more attention to history. At no point has any medium or practice of selling ever completely replaced any previous version. It will simply be a different way people pay for games. It's one that I personally don't do, because I don't like doing it, but yeah, it's a way of selling games. I think it's not inherently evil. I think a lot of the ways it's been done up 'til now have been inherently evil, but the business model of free-to-play is not evil. I think free-to-play in the right hands can do really cool things, but it's not for me.

MIKE BITHELL, CREATOR OF THOMAS WAS ALONE

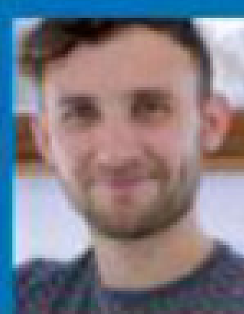
WHAT DOES THE MINECRAFT DEAL MEAN FOR GAMING?



That story, Markus Persson's story, should be truly inspirational to people. Here's someone who was working in the industry for ten or fifteen years making casual games, he kind of said 'I've had enough of this', he left and set up his own studio with a crazy idea, which probably no one would fund – 'Let's just make an open world where you build things' – and three, four, five years later he sells it for $2 billion. That's the stuff of legend in any industry and I think it's just a fantastic testament to what he created that anyone could value it that amount and just shows that the dream is still there.

There's probably another Markus Persson somewhere in the world doing that crazy thing right now and in another five years we'll probably see another huge billion dollar deal. It was ripe for the taking, though, and we could all see it. *Minecraft* was so all-pervasive culturally and it's probably almost the poster child for computer games now. That's pretty incredible.

PETER MOLYNEUX OBE, 22CANS FOUNDER



The *Minecraft* deal is a phenomenon, but it goes to show the power that a game IP can have. When games like *Minecraft* or *Angry Birds* blow up to such an extent that they both have, I find myself trying to work out what the formula is that has resulted in their mass appeal. But of course, there isn't one. Their success comes down to right time, right place and finding a look and feel that just hits home with huge numbers of people.

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, NINJA THEORY PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER



I think people wanted me to be a bit more annoyed about the *Minecraft* thing than I was. It's like, they made a thing and Microsoft think it's worth 2.5 billion dollars, and it's kind of hard to disagree with that. I think actually that's probably the bargain of the century. I think it's probably worth a little bit more than that. But just given how big this has been for this generation, and that in twenty years' time this generation are going to be having kids that they want to give *Minecraft* to. This is *Star Wars* for this generation. We have no idea how culturally important *Minecraft* is yet, and we won't for decades. So I think 2.5 billion for that, it is like someone buying *Star Wars* back in the Seventies from Lucas for a couple of billion. It's a brilliant deal.

I want Markus to be off making whatever he wants with all the money he can. As someone who likes videogames, I want him to be able to do that, because he makes good videogames. So I think it's great. I think it's fine. He's not sold out. It really annoys me when people say he sold out. He did literally sell out, but you know what I mean.

MIKE BITHELL, CREATOR OF THOMAS WAS ALONE

> "THIS IS STAR WARS FOR THIS GENERATION. WE HAVE NO IDEA HOW CULTURALLY IMPORTANT MINECRAFT IS YET, AND WE WON'T FOR DECADES"



I love it. I love them so much, because didn't you hate it when *Minecraft* was a thing? People thought that was a nice little indie thing that people were making out of love, but the thing is, when you start having things like Minecon, I think Microsoft buying *Minecraft* was like the god of business restoring equilibrium to the marketplace.

WILLIAM PUGH, DESIGNER/WRITER ON THE STANLEY PARABLE

THE INFLUENCE OF CROWDFUNDING



It is very competitive now on crowdfunding and every day people see another project being crowdfunded and they're getting a little bit exhausted from paying attention to it. Of course the exception to all of this is *Star Citizen*, which is a phenomena all to itself, but I don't see many other examples of the *Star Citizen* style thing. I'm sure it will still be there, I just think the amount of pre-work you have to do before launching your Kickstarter campaign and the careful consideration of what you Kickstart is just going to increase.

PETER MOLYNEUX OBE, 22CANS FOUNDER



I think it's a great way for small teams to get going quickly. However, there are obviously risks and a few times already we've seen prominent crowd-funded games nosedive, taking people's money with them. There's also an ambiguous moral pitfall when the creator of the game makes changes beyond those agreed with backers, who might end up getting something they didn't expect!

ALASDAIR EVANS, SENIOR PRODUCER AT LAUGHING JACKAL

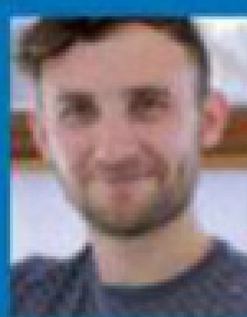




I hate crowdfunding. It gives idiots with no money the idea that they can actually make a game. People think, 'Oh yeah, we'll hire some people.' I despise *Yogventures*, and actually Yogscast. I hate you all, Yogscast, and I want this to be in the article, and when you edit this down I want this bit in that I'm saying right now. I think they were right morons to ask for so much money for such a really bad game idea, as well. Most of the people who make things through Kickstarter are so completely mewling and ineffectual that they couldn't even achieve something good or evil, just lame and boring. I hate Kickstarter. It's stupid.

WILLIAM PUGH, DESIGNER/WRITER ON THE STANLEY PARABLE

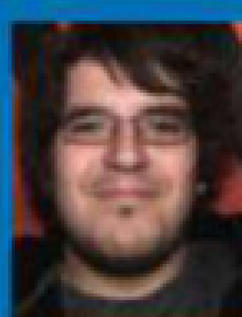
> "HOPEFULLY MORE BANKS WILL START OPENING THEIR DOORS TO GAME PROJECTS AND INVESTORS WILL REGAIN FAITH IN CONSOLE GAMING"



Although I think that Kickstarter and crowdfunding will remain as an option for developers, my hope is that confidence in independently developed and self-published games will grow to such an extent that new funding streams will open up. Hopefully more banks will start opening their doors to game projects and investors will regain faith in console gaming.

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, NINJA THEORY PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER





Square Enix is experimenting with their Collective Initiative, pairing up developers with their back cat IP whilst reaching out to the community for financial support to bring these IP to life. Other schemes will inevitably pop-up. The big challenge for a developer is coordinating the campaign, as success demands 100% commitment and servicing the pledges with frequent, if not daily updates. Still, as we look to the future, it's reassuring to know there is a vibrant eco-system to reach out to before the credit card.

JAMES MEGRETTON, SUMO DIGITAL COMMUNITY COORDINATOR





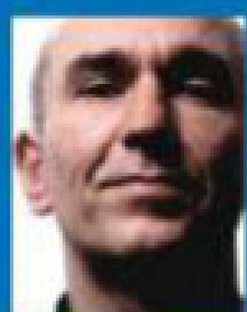
POWER OF SELF-PUBLISHING



The one area that I think we have to work on as an industry is the consumer side of that, is that because all the floodgates have opened, I do worry that there is some awful stuff being sold to players and that might cause us some problems down the line because there might be some loss of faith in, kind of, the quality bar of these platforms.

MIKE BITHELL, CREATOR OF THOMAS WAS ALONE



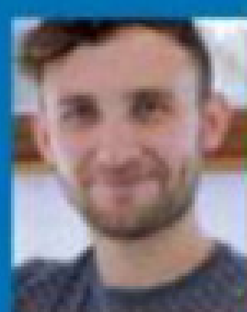


Self-publishing is something we've done a fair amount now. Firstly, it sounds really simple, doesn't it? You can just upload anything to Steam and to iOS and Android any time you'd like. But of course the one fundamental problem with self-publishing is discovery. Anyone can launch an app on to the App Store or on to Steam, but how do people know about it? And that's where the real problem comes. It's also one thing to launch something on to Steam or iOS, but it's another thing to maintain it. Very often, especially with iOS, you have to change yourself from being a developer or an inventor or a creator to someone who's servicing a product. You become more of a service company and that requires another lot of skills.

PETER MOLYNEUX OBE, 22CANS FOUNDER





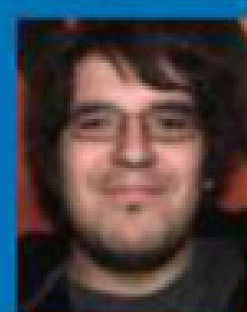


Self-publishing, along with digital distribution, means that mid-size developers like us can make games that sit in the currently empty space between triple-A and indie.

Games that I've loved playing in the past like *Parappa The Rapper* or *Jet Set Radio* wouldn't be made in today's triple-A retail market, they wouldn't appeal to enough people, but they could thrive in the self-published, digital space that is now emerging.

With *Hellblade*, we're focusing on combat gameplay, art direction and story. By self-funding the game, self-publishing the game and distributing it digitally we don't need the game to sell millions of units to be a success. If we can sell 300,000 copies of the game, *Hellblade* will have been made back its development budget. While triple-A retail games are trying to justify huge development budgets by appealing to everyone, we're comfortable in the fact that we can make a game just for our fans and people that love the types of games that we make.

DOMINIC MATTHEWS, NINJA THEORY PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER



All developers want to create their own IP and self-publish but one of the biggest obstacles is discoverability. Traditionally, this function is taken care of by a publisher. And it's not to be overlooked. They have the expertise in-house, have the relationships with the media, and the finances to support activity. Although, the games-as-a-service approach has changed how games are developed – with developers putting out an MVP or "Early Access" experience and iterating frantically in the background.

JAMES MEGRETTON, SUMO DIGITAL COMMUNITY COORDINATOR



Now I guess you can dictate the terms more concerning the kinds of games you want to make, so smaller and more diverse projects can appear which might never have seen the light of day just a few years ago. In terms of marketing that's the single biggest struggle independent developers face outside of making a good game. It's such a crowded marketplace and everyone's shouting to be heard. But the fact that console manufacturers have opened the gates at all is a great thing!

ALASDAIR EVANS, SENIOR PRODUCER AT LAUGHING JACKAL

UPCOMING PROJECTS

What's our panel of experts working on next? We let them explain…

THE TRAIL



Despite recently announcing *The Trail*, Peter Molyneux wanted to avoid saying too much about his game; "After the experiences with Kickstarter and early access and gamma on mobile and what it's like to release something and continue to evolve it, I think that I prefer to get a game to a certain level of quality before saying anything about it."

BIRD BALL



People can't pre-order [*Bird Ball*], people can't buy it. We don't even have a website for people to go to. It's not going to reach a big audience. It'll just be, like, we'll show it around festivals, and maybe some indies will like it, and then they'll play it some more. I mean, kids seem to like it.

WILLIAM PUGH

FLAME OVER



We're currently putting the finishing touches to our firefighting roguelike *Flame Over* which features randomly generated levels, a dynamic fire system and beautiful top-down 3D graphics. You can pick up Flame Over on Vita in January 2015, with PS4 and Steam versions to follow after.

ALASDAIR EVANS

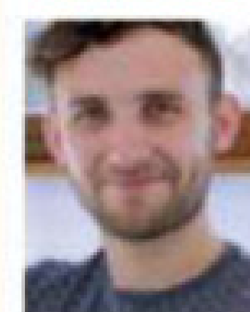
SUMO DIGITAL



We've wrapped up development on two large projects of late with *Forza Horizon 2* (Xbox 360) and *LittleBigPlanet 3* (PS4 and PS3). As for what's next? We want to keep developing awesome games, games that excite us and push our technology and expertise forward. Watch this space.

JAMES MEGRETTON

HELLBLADE



We're working on a new combat game called *Hellblade*, which we're independently developing and self-publishing for PlayStation 4. As part of the *Hellblade* project we're sharing as much of the development process as we possibly can, on Hellblade.com and through our Twitter.

DOMINIC MATTHEWS

VOLUME



What we've been really excited to announce is the involvement of Andy Serkis, who's going to be playing our villain Guy Gisborne, who's the CEO of this company that's basically taken over England. He's kind of an evil Alan Sugar.

MIKE BITHELL

The Sound of Things to Come

As the games industry grows and begins spilling over into mainstream media, we're starting to get gaming rockstars – whether they're developers, voice actors, designers or composers, the people working on games are starting to become household names. But what about the sound designers? How many of them do you know by name? Every single game you've ever played required someone to create, organise and implement all the sound effects and aural ambience you've heard. We sat down with Glen Gathard, head of recording and editing at Pinewood Studios, and Steve Brown, associate audio producer for Lionhead, to talk about how far sound design has come in games, and where it's yet to go…

GLEN GATHARD HAS worked on James Bond's *Skyfall*, both *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* films, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Captain Phillips*. He worked on this year's biggest survival horror hit, *Alien: Isolation*, and was responsible for generating that sense of unease and restlessness that permeated the game's atmosphere. It could be argued he's taking all the aural elements that made his films so successful and is applying them to games.

"When you're creating for a feature film, you've got maybe an hour and a half to two hours with multiple cuts you're working to. But at the end of the day, you are working towards a set scenario," explains Gathard when we ask him about the different processes behind working on games and film audio. "In games… well, I've been playing *Battlefield* for over a year, and the sound *has* to remain interesting the whole time. Game audio that's done well *does* remain interesting all the way through. It's a hard thing to get your head round, because it's a linear process in film, but in games you need to bear in mind the whole production schedule – if we're working on something in January, we need to be aware that something else is due to come in during December, so we've got to plan ahead to accommodate that."

"The way I always try and differentiate film and game audio is this: you think, film is a long-running line," chips in Steve Brown, Lionhead's associate audio producer. Brown's been with Lionhead for a while, and he and Gathard have formed a solid working partnership in their time together. Their conversations are fluid and easy, and they often finished off each other's sentences. "When it's edited, film goes from X to Y. It never stops, it's always going forward. You've got a man running down the road, you *know* he's going to turn left and—"

"Well, most of the time," interrupts Gathard "it depends how big the film is: if they go *mental* with the recuts…"

"Well yeah, but film audio – widely – is a horizontal thing," continues Brown, undeterred. "With games, you have to work on the *vertical* all the time. It's like you've got footsteps, say, »



as a core, but then there's a scuff when the player stops, or they could fall over, or the player could just keep going. Game sound has to accommodate all those, it has to work vertically; therefore, sounds have to be able to work together, to be able to go in any direction."

It makes sense to think of sound in this way – right now, Gathard and Brown are working on *Fable Legends*, a four-on-one asymmetrical multiplayer game where the team of heroes play from a third-person, over-the-shoulder angle, and the villain plays top-down, like an RTS. To mix and balance the sound for each different player requires a catalogue of thousands of sounds at the ready, all of which are to be triggered at the slightest motion.

"You always have to be prepared for the audio in games to be responsive to the emotion or reaction of the player," explains Gathard. "So if I'm in *Grand Theft Auto V*, I can decide to go totally off-mission and put a window through in a car – the sound *has* to be there for that; it may not be predicted game behaviour, but the sound files still need to exist and we need to have planned for that."

"So, in *Fable Legends*, it's all about knowing how many animations our hero has; that sculpts the soundscape. You've got to cater for that – we get given [raw assets] and have to make sound to fit," Brown outlines.

THIS IS SO MUCH MORE THAN JUST MAKING NOISE. THIS IS MAKING NOISE ARTFULLY

"Yeah," agrees Gathard, "you're constantly trying to make the world believable in about a billion different situations at a time."

So how do they do it? How do sound designers go from having a lifeless animation in front of them to bringing it to life with sound? The Foley artists (read: actors microphoned up to imitate sounds they see on-screen in real life) are equipped with a series of materials and, as they act and produce aural hits, the audio producers record, log and edit the samples, fitting them to whatever animation is being shown.

"Everyone in the film world expects me to like setting fire to things and blowing stuff up," laughs Gathard, "but I really like detail, from a film perspective. Everyone thinks I just want to throw cars through walls, just because we broke up a few Aston Martins for [*Skyfall*]... but I like the details. Woman walks in room, heels on hardwood. She puts her handbag down, the chinking of jewellery. That kind of thing, y'know?"

We're shown a video of what Gathard mentioned in action – on-screen, the *Fable Legends* heroes perform specific actions, something the team calls 'sonic signifiers': unique sounds that each hero will make to identify them over the din of combat – a method of characterisation through sound. Leech, the masked apothecarist, has the chinking of potion bottles as his signifier. As he runs on screen, Foley artists clink glass on glass. The timing and the performance of it is impressive – this is so much more than just making noise. This is making noise *artfully*.

SO WHAT ARE the main things to be cautious of? If you're gluing together the sound of a game, there are going to be certain things that trip you up – we're used to playing games and hearing certain bytes of sound that really get under our skin (*Sunset Overdrive*'s can-popping-open noise, for example), and yet there are some sounds that'll never get old (the Servitor Strike boss in *Destiny* exploding). When you're listening to the same samples of sound over and over again, how do you step back and decide what makes the cut?

"'Three is the Golden Rule', we'll tell ourselves; you can get away with hearing a sound twice in quick succession, but any more than that and you start getting this earworm thing–" explains Brown.

" –and you think 'is this a game from the early Nineties?' [laughter]" jokes Gathard.

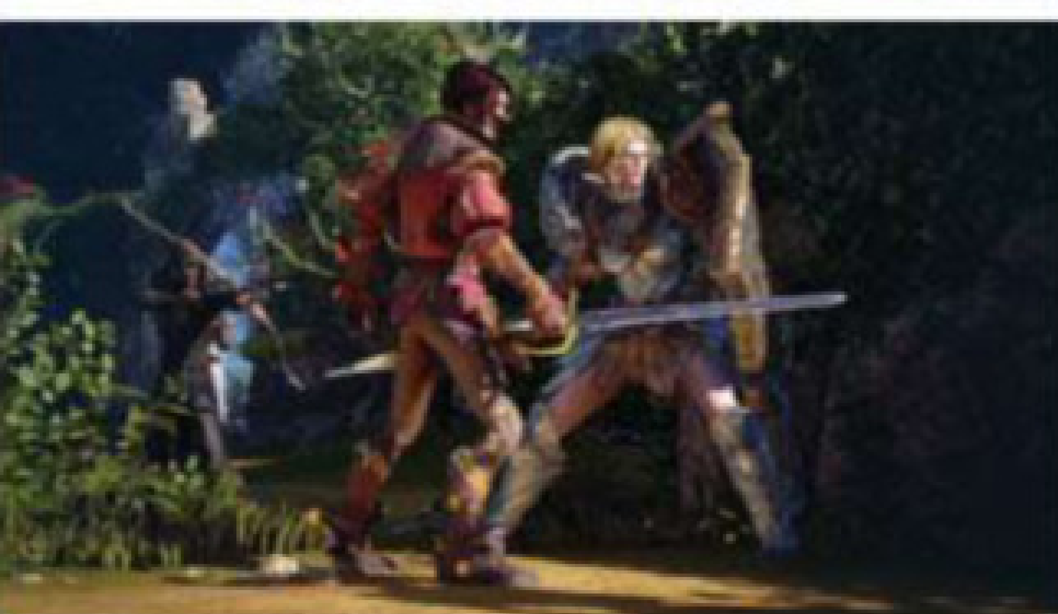
"You do – back then the memory for games was so tight you could only have a handful of sound effects in there. With the Xbox One's memory increase, the scale of complexity for managing audio increases tenfold as well," Brown continues.

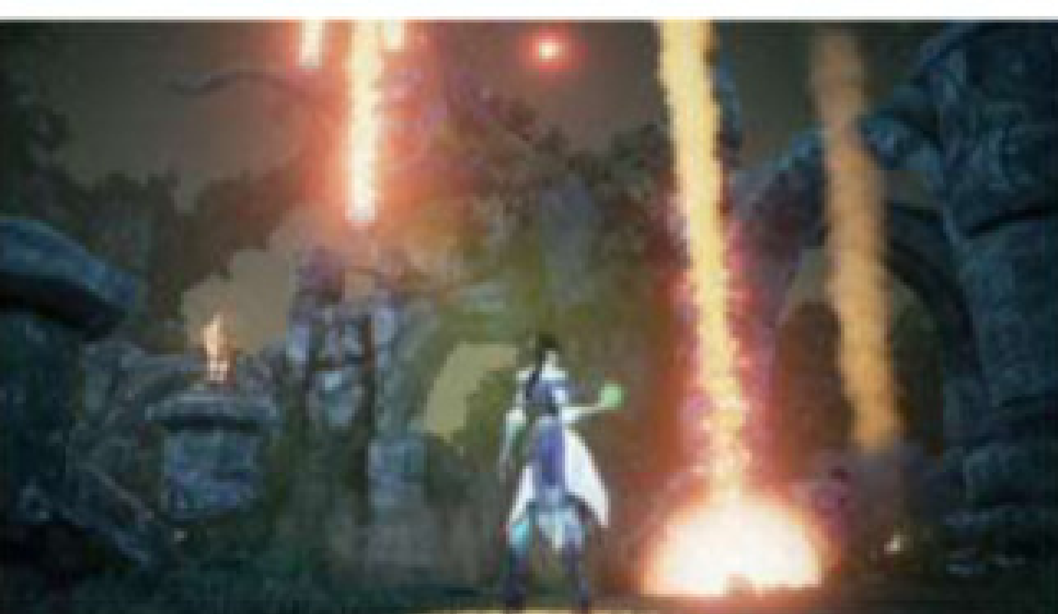
This raises an interesting point – the previous generation of consoles allowed only 30mb of memory for sound at any one point, so all the sound effects acting concurrently in-game either had to be compressed or be fairly short, with audio designers having to pick and choose what effects they wanted to use during particularly cinematic cutscenes or prioritise sounds during busy gameplay segments. One of the under-reported boons of the Xbox One and PS4 is how much more memory the consoles devote to sound – it's almost ten times as much as the 360 and PS3.

"We can have over 300 megabytes of sound operating in run-time at the moment," explains Brown, detailing the Xbox One's potential, specifically. "I mean, that's a lot, but it also gives you enough rope to hang yourself









Fable Legends has a cast of ten playable heroes, and Lionhead and Pinewood thought closely about how each should sonically occupy the game space

Glory

Steve Brown: "Glory's this prim and proper protagonist – there's a lot of stuff in her backstory about how she potentially killed her dad because she wanted to be this evil magic lady... but she's pretty, and she's high-class. We got some high heels out to get her footsteps, and we got the stone we shot everyone else's footsteps on, but Glen turned to me and said 'this isn't pretty enough for her, this isn't expensive enough'... so we shot it on solid marble!"

Glen Gathard: "It sounded beautiful. And she's the only one shot on marble, too"

Steve Brown: "And then there's the bag, too. [laughter] Glen wanted to use the Foley artist's bag for Glory's sonic signifier – Glory's got this lovely bag with a really intricate buckle on it – and so I picked up the bag and gave it a whirl... the Foley artist said 'there is *no way* you're using my Burberry bag for Foley...'"

Glen Gathard: "But we totally used her bag! [both laugh]"

Winter

Glen Gathard: "I like Winter's effects – she can spray out ice and use all this magic to slow down enemies. We needed to find a way to create elements for the sound designers to work with. Winter was mostly composed on Lionhead's side, because we use Foley, but Winter was Foley *and* digital effects."

Steve Brown: "When we were shooting it, I said, 'Oh, shall we get some ice out?' [To Glen] But then you said, 'Yeah, but that won't sound like anything...' So Glen went to the cupboard – and this is really quite dangerous – and pulled out this chandelier of shattered glass, all on strings, and jangled it around. It made this lovely, magical, sparkly sound – and we were thinking of Winter's 'ice hose' at the time and it all just clicked."

Glen Gathard: "We also wrapped a microphone in tin-foil and poured salt over the top of it to get a bed of tingly sounds for other Winter effects..."

Steve Brown: "Oh, and we let off a fire extinguisher."

Glen Gathard: Yeah, but that didn't work. [laughter]

Steve Brown: When you freeze a character as Winter, they turn into this big ice shard, and we did all this really great cracking stuff to get those sounds. So I'd stand on top of this glass, with a mic pressed against it, and we just had to make it *break*. It was very enjoyable.

Glen Gathard: We then put salt and tiles underneath the glass, too, so when you stand on it, you get this frozen ice-lake kind of sound without actually having to freeze anything. We used a similar technique in [*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*] when Harry meets the Patronus, but we adapted it for *Fable*."

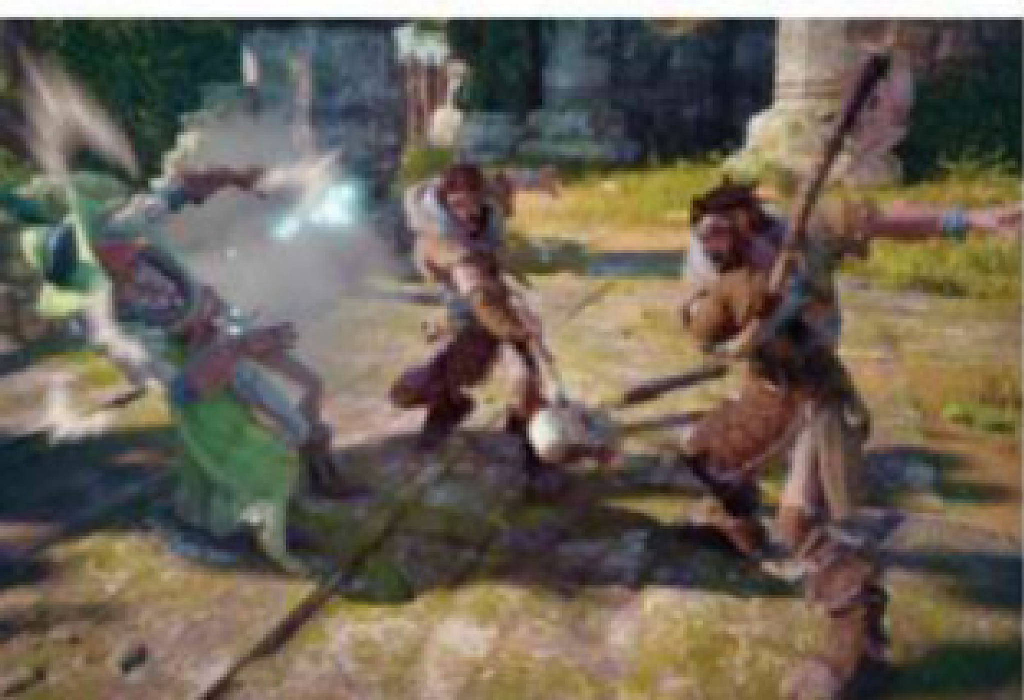
Fable Legend's enemies have been given deeper, more imposing sounds to elicit a feeling of dread from the player.

Environmental effects have been designed to make you feel a sense of place from the levels.

Each character's 'sonic signifier' has been thoughtfully crafted.









■ *Fable Legends' soundtrack has been designed specifically to mimic the ebb and flow of battle in real-time.*

■ *After seeing the Foley actors in action, it's hard not to hear the sounds of glass being broken when you hear Winter's ice spells in action.*





» with. In terms of the production of the audio, big budget games get to spend a lot of money on foley, but you can get so wrapped up in it – you've always got to come back to the core and think 'does this sound give *key* gameplay feedback to the player?' If the answer's no, you scrap it."

"That's actually how we work in feature films, too," explains Gathard. "Even if we've got the budget to put every single sound that could possibly be there in the film, we realise that *isn't* what we want to do and end up detracting from the things we actually want the audience to listen to."

What Gathard says made us realise something then – games are all about immersion and creating the feeling that you're in a world, that you're an active agent taking part in the fantasy of someone else's creation, but to fully realise that fantasy, designers are saying just as much with what they're leaving out as what they're putting in. Think about *Call of Duty* – if you genuinely had *all* the sounds of a war playing out around you, you wouldn't be able to concentrate, and it'd be nothing short of traumatising. By omitting certain aural elements, the designers over at Sledgehammer or Infinity Ward or Treyarch make war a more manageable place. An explosion here, *one* Wilhelm scream there and a flurry of bullet fire tends to be the norm... but there's another trick audio designers use to make things seem more real, even when they're stripping back the overbearing reality of the areas they're creating.

"One thing we love to play on in film is the 'imperfection of sound' – I'm very big on that. If there's a little creak or scratch or something, I love that, because that's what you hear in real-life," reveals Gathard. "No one hears perfect footsteps – sometimes you never hear a footstep at all, it might just be a scuff – so when we're asked for footsteps in a game, if you provide this regimented series of files, when it plays back it just sounds like a fake army. In my brain, when I hear that, I think 'that sounds like an old-school game'. We're not trying to do that now: what we're constantly trying to sell you is that this, Albion, is *your* world now. This is where you are. So in *that* world, as in this world, you don't want to hear everything – you *do* want imperfection in the cloth, you want that tick on the recording, because that's natural."

IN GAMES, IT MAKES SENSE TO HAVE SOME BLEMISHES ON THE SOUND – IT SOUNDS MUCH MORE NATURAL

It's a technique travelling from Hollywood that we would never have thought of in the game – when the foley artist accidentally lands on anything but the flat of their foot for a sound byte, maybe that sounds better than a series of perfect footsteps. It's something you couldn't really get away with too often in movies – after all, you're supposed to hear a perfect representation of what you're seeing on-screen – but in games, with the obstruction of vision, the repetition of sounds and the open nature of how you control your character, it makes sense to have some blemishes on the sound – as Gathard says, it sounds much more natural.

"Yeah that's true, and you can tell when a studio puts the work in, too," agrees Gathard. "You could make the best-looking game in the world, with the best gameplay, but if the sound was shit you wouldn't play it... well, at least *I* wouldn't play it."

"No, me neither," Brown interjects. "I'd turn it off... [laughter]"

"It's kind of a thankless task," Gathard continues, "because if we do our job well, you should believe 'this is reality', and you shouldn't have to think 'oh this sword sounds amazing' all the time – it should just *be* a part of what you're experiencing. I mean, of course that drives me *mental*, but you know... [laughter] There is a lot of trial and error in this side of development, and people don't always tend to see that. Saying that, I kind of get to work in a playground all day, so... [laughter]"

"We might all say it's a lot of fun, but there's a hell of a lot of audio engineering that goes on, too," Brown adds. "Knowing all the frequencies, the EQing, riding the fade on the desk... it sounds like we just bang a lot of stuff together, but there's a hell of a lot of technicality to it."

"We'd talk about that more," laughs Gathard. "But it tends to bore the hell out of people so we stick to the stories about making noise!" 





■ *People automatically assume that someone must dislike a company to leave them, but check out Bowling's office: riddled with Call Of Duty memorabilia. He's a man seriously proud of the series, but one who needed a change – hence, Robotoki.*

Going beyond Infinity

ROBOTOKI

GAMES™ SPEAKS WITH ROBERT BOWLING OF ROBOTOKI TO FIND OUT WHAT A MAN DOES AFTER HE LEAVES ONE OF GAMING'S BIGGEST FRANCHISES. THE ANSWER? HUMAN ELEMENT

FROM BILLIONS TO bedrooms, almost, Robert Bowling's career trajectory is one we're likely to see more of in future. Moving on from Infinity Ward in 2012, the former community manager and creative strategist behind some of *Call Of Duty*'s biggest releases soon set his sights elsewhere. Robotoki was formed, a game called *Human Element* was announced and then... over two years of silence. But it's time to start talking again.

95 per cent of the world's population is dead. Small bands of survivors remain, struggling to survive in a planet ravaged by a zombie outbreak. But *Human Element* isn't about the people-on-dead people fighting: it's about... well the human element. With so few resources left on the planet and a few last batches of aid resources dropped on locations around the world, the game sees players battling other factions in order to get hold of that precious ability to survive just a little bit longer.

"What *Human Element* focuses on is survivors from each of those factions all going to that destination," Bowling explains. "Think of that tense moment in every zombie film when two groups of survivors come together and meet for the first time and there's shared resources that they all need. Every match in *Human Element* focuses on that encounter – all these survivors arriving in the same place at the same time, then the struggle over those last resources."

There's no talking your way out of it – each encounter is a struggle in this action-based game. While once it might have focused more on the survival side of things, *Human Element* has developed over the years into a focused, online first-person shooter. Elements of narrative have been dropped, classes have been refocused, planned spin-offs have been put on the back burner. But this isn't a case of failure – it's evolution.

Some might look on the reining in of features as a limitation, but Bowling explained that's not the case. *Human Element* is no longer an open-world game, true, but there is more to it than just run-and-gun – there's flexibility in the approach. "The win scenarios in these games aren't team deathmatch rules, it's not get the most kills or kill the most survivors, it's get the resources out," Bowling clarified. "If you get the resources out without engaging in any combat – that's an avenue you can take. But ultimately if you're looking at a team of five vs five, your best strategy is to have at least a few people in there dedicated to combat roles so that they can support you or cover you while you might be doing the runaround, jumping on »

» the rat bike, flying into the outpost, grabbing the bag and getting out."

The move to multiplayer shooter was a big one, though, when you consider that *Human Element* was originally a single-player (online) game with the ability to temporarily team up with other players as and when you chose to. A big reason why the focus changed to team-based play, Bowling explained, was because it *encourages* team play. It might sound obvious, but if that was a goal from the outset then making a single-player online experience isn't the best way to get people to work together.

"What we'd found was that when it was open-ended it turned into a murder-fest more often than when it's not," Bowling said. "You would hope that players would see each other and be like 'Well maybe I'll team up with that guy' – but in reality they just want to murder everyone they see. If it moves, they'll shoot it." He stifled a chuckle at this point and continued: "So what we wanted to do was find ways to structure it a little bit to encourage that team play, to encourage the support role and stealth role, encourage a different variety of gameplay rather than just leaving it completely open ended, which turned it into a bit of a motorcycle fuck-fest at that point."

The actual in-game action isn't the only area that's seen big changes – it was, for a long time, set to be a free-to-play title published by F2P super-publisher Nexon. The relationship was dissolved amicably in November 2014 and the game moved to a more traditional model. Bowling explained: "From early on when we signed the publishing deal the focus is always on 'let's make a fun game that we can monetise'. The success of the game is make or break on the monetisation."



■ *Human Element has evolved to focus on player experience.*



THIS FOCUS ON figuring out what to charge would take up around a year of *Human Element*'s development, but increasingly it proved to run counter to what Robotoki wanted to accomplish with the game. It would make sense for a developer to put the best and most fun features behind a paywall – they're the things people want to experience, after all – but it ran counter to a philosophical swing in the studio itself.

"Seeing how players use a feature and take it in an unexpected way to create gameplay for other players – that's what makes good games," Bowling explains. "A lot of times we were putting features that would lead to that experimental gameplay, that would lead to the emergent gameplay, behind monetisation, and then you lost it. Only the paid players could experience that, and only the paid players could experiment with that. It took something special away."

With that realisation and subsequent change in attitude, the Nexon partnership was cancelled – and the fun elements of the game could be freed up. Such a change in direction after a fair amount of time working on the game isn't something that a bigger studio could do – in fact, it's something even smaller studios would find difficult to reconcile.

But this ability to change, even if it isn't easy to admit you're doing things wrong, has been nothing but a benefit to *Human Element*, according to Bowling. The 'new' game that will hit in November 2015 will be, according to the studio chief, far more focused than it ever would have been. Part of that agile approach to development came into play through the decision to hold daily playtest sessions, with the team sharing war stories after. Discussion leads to cool stories, cool stories lead to the best and most favoured elements becoming clear, said elements becoming clear leads to

"WE WANTED TO ENCOURAGE A DIFFERENT VARIETY OF GAMEPLAY"
ROBERT BOWLING, PRESIDENT, ROBOTOKI

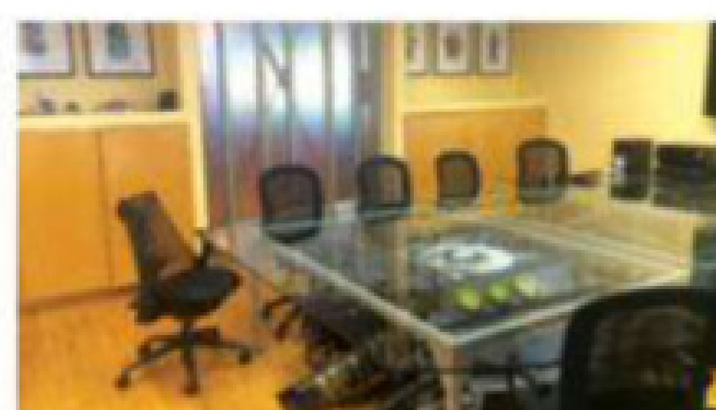
■ *Robotoki appears to be a studio where people have fun.*



ROBOTOKI









■ *Considering this chap lives in a post-apocalyptic hellhole riddled with a zombie infection, he has surprisingly clean trousers.*

those parts of the game being refined, strengthened and beefed up to make things even better.

"In a perfect world, as gamers, we want every feature – and why not?" Bowling says. "But in reality you have to focus what is going to be the most polished, fun experience at the end of the game. Don't just cram something in because it's a good idea if you don't have the resources and time to execute it in a way it should be." Similarly, if something is getting rave reviews every day as a part of said playtesting, it's likely to be worth another look.

"That's really why the motorcycle became such a key part of the gameplay," Bowling said. "We would playtest every single day and players would constantly have stories about motorcycle engagements – 'I was in this outpost and this guy ran through this plane crash and landed in the centre of this outpost, he had a sticky bomb on the bike so it blew up and it killed three guards, but it didn't permanently kill them so they turned into the fast zombies then they ate the other guards which allowed me to single-handedly take the outpost...' That's a fucking good story!

"THEN WE REALISED we should focus getting the motorcycle gameplay super-polished," he continued. "We did that and someone said it would be cool if they could shoot from the motorcycle, so we focused on motorcycle combat, then another player said it would be good to pick up a buddy.

"What we've done is really just focused in on a lot of core gameplay systems and mechanics. Then just put them in a big map and allowed the players to create stories out of those moments. If you give players a motorcycle, if you give them sticky explosives and you give them the ability to fortify bases, they're going »



■ *It's difficult not to see this image and have thoughts of three distinct titles spring to mind: Rage, Borderlands and Brink.*

Answering the Call

He left Infinity Ward after falling out of love with the series, but does Bowling still play CoD?

■ He's best known for his time as community manager at Infinity Ward, dealing with the plentiful feedback of the millions of Call of Duty fans around the world – but does Bowling still closely follow the series since leaving IW in 2012? "I don't. I have them, I've played them, but I'm not ingrained in the community by any means," he said. "I couldn't tell you what the latest grief is, what exploit everybody's talking about – I play them from a purely '20-feet away, pick it up on launch day and have the fun I'm going to have with it' sort of experience." Given the notorious venom of some of COD's more vocal community, we found it somewhat surprising Bowling does still bother with the series. But he revealed a clever technique for avoiding it: not talking. "Now when I play Call of Duty I don't use microphones and I don't have voice turned on, from them or me," he laughed. "It's a very different experience when you don't actually let the community into your experience – it's drastically different. Where before I was as ingrained as you could get in every facet of what that franchise was, now I can enjoy it how I imagine the majority of people enjoy it. You can just get on the ride and let it be, then walk away and be like 'That was a fun experience!'"



■ *Above: Bowling is Infinity Ward's ex Community Manager*

ROBOTOKI

WHAT A DIFFERENCE

The long radio silence about *Human Element* is because the game has changed a lot...

■ THE *HUMAN ELEMENT* ANNOUNCED ON JUNE 1, 2012 WAS A VERY DIFFERENT GAME TO THAT WE WILL SEE RELEASED IN NOVEMBER 2015. BOWLING TOLD US HE HASN'T ENTIRELY DROPPED THESE INITIAL PLANS – THEY WILL RETURN IF THE FIRST GAME IS SUCCESSFUL – BUT FOR NOW THESE ARE JUST ANOTHER SET OF AMBITIOUS PLANS THAT DIDN'T COME TO FRUITION.

ORIGINALLY *HUMAN ELEMENT* WAS SET TO BE RELEASED ON PC, WITH A COMPANION VERSION RELEASED ON TABLETS. THE PC GAME WOULD OFFER THE BEST EXPERIENCE IN THIS SINGLE-PLAYER, ONLINE, SURVIVAL-BASED OPEN WORLD GAME FOR THOSE LOOKING FOR A TRADITIONAL SHOOTER-STYLE OF EXPERIENCE. BUT THOSE WHO WANTED TO OPT FOR NON-COMBAT ROLES WOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO CONCENTRATE ON THE TABLET VERSION, FOR EXAMPLE IN A SURVIVAL EXPERIENCE, SCAVENGING AND ALLYING WITH AGGRESSIVE PLAYERS FOR BUFFS AND PROTECTION. THERE WAS ALSO A PREQUEL SPIN-OFF PLANNED AT ONE POINT – AND THIS AGES THE GAME SOMEWHAT – PLANNED FOR OUYA. ACCORDING TO BOWLING THIS VERSION WAS CANCELLED VERY EARLY ON, WITH PLANS QUICKLY MOVED BACK TO THE PC AND OTHER, PRESUMABLY MORE POPULAR AND SUCCESSFUL, FORMATS.

IT'S SAFE TO SAY THIS HAS ALL BEEN SCALED BACK – THE AMBITIOUS PROJECT WAS SIMPLY TOO MUCH FOR A SMALL STUDIO JUST STARTING OUT TO HANDLE. BUT THE PLANS ARE STILL THERE AND THE GROUNDWORK COULD WELL BE PUT IN PLACE BY THE VERSION OF *HUMAN ELEMENT* WE ARE GOING TO GET. SO DON'T THROW THOSE TABLETS IN THE BIN JUST YET. THE OUYA? WELL, THAT'S UP TO YOU.

» to come up with so many ways to combine those things that would be far better than anything you would write. Way better than anything we could design for."

It's not all change, with the aforementioned evolution factor meaning this is a game that has built and built some more, rather than burned it all down and started again. "We kept a lot of the open-world elements," Bowling explained. "These are big maps we're playing in. We kept some of these open world elements – you can explore the whole map, you can find scrap used to fortify an outpost, we kept a lot of the elements of the open world survival game, but then focused in the gameplay... that's really apparent. It is a very natural evolution, which I wish every game had the luxury to do – to evolve into its natural form, rather than what was dictated from day one. All games change a little bit through development, but this is unique."





One thing doesn't evolve so much, though – anything played online is subject to one constant: griefing. Robotoki is taking that into consideration with its design, another element helped in no small part thanks to Bowling's involvement with the world's most popular online shooter series. "There isn't a design meeting that we have or a feature that we work on that isn't put against the griefer/realistic community look," he said. "That goes through every aspect of the game – when we're looking at features, the last question we have to ask ourselves is 'that's the dream use of the feature – now, how is the asshole going to use it? How are they going to use it to get more XP or benefit themselves in a way that wasn't intended?'"

BUT WHY DOES this matter so much? What benefits can come from such constant discussions? Why not just polish the ban hammer and have at it? Because it helps the game be

> "IT IS A VERY NATURAL EVOLUTION, WHICH I WISH EVERY GAME HAD THE LUXURY TO DO – TO EVOLVE INTO ITS NATURAL FORM"
> ROBERT BOWLING, PRESIDENT, ROBOTOKI



■ *The 'rat bike' wasn't even in Human Element originally, with the game featuring zero plans to include vehicles at all. But it was introduced, it was popular, and now it makes up a big part of the game.*

■ *Robotoki has worked hard to build a game that can be conquered in many different ways.*

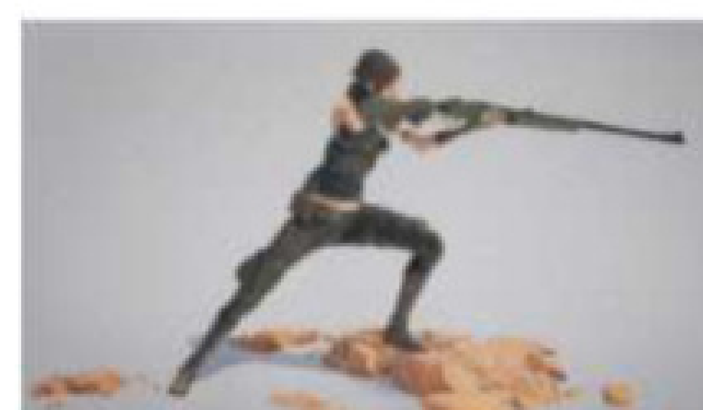
better, Bowling told us: "It's really about finding ways to turn that fun into emergent gameplay rather than annoying gameplay. What happens when the player does X? Okay, we know they're going to do it, this feature is too good to lose, we don't want to lose it just because people will abuse it, how can we then give the other player a counter to it that is equally as fun? That's really what we look at, and I think we've struck a good balance by giving them freedom and flexibility."

There's also the fact that *Human Element*... well, isn't *Call of Duty*. "I think the best way I can sum it up, the difference of working on that versus working on Human Element, is that *Call Of Duty* is a theme park ride, designed for every player to have the exact same level of fun," Bowling said. "You sort of have a guarantee there, which is nice, you have this guarantee that everyone is going to have this base level of fun. What we're doing with *Human Element* is a very different experience – this is more like travelling abroad, where we want to plop you into a world. People when they're travelling overseas and you go to a new city, some people are going to gravitate towards the beach, some to the dining, some to the tourist traps – everyone is going to go to what they like to do... We want to put in compelling shooter mechanics, but also compelling vehicle mechanics and compelling stealth or support mechanics, compelling defence and fortification mechanics, and not really dictate how you use any of them, so you gravitate towards the sort of gameplay that you enjoy."

He continued: "I think that's why it's an important distinction that, by default, we don't assume everybody is a killer type of player who wants to start with an assault rifle – we give you the freedom to pick a hero that identifies with the type of thing you're going to be doing in the game."

There's a lot of hope from Bowling and the Robotoki team for *Human Element* – and with good cause: this isn't intended to be a one-off. The first release is to establish things, to set up systems and introduce people to what Bowling referred to as a 'platform'. There's no intention to make a yearly, cookie-cutter franchise out of *Human Element*, mind, but there is more planned for the future – even before the first game is out there.







"This is the start of an evolution of an experience," Bowling told us. "What I would love to see *Human Element* become is every iteration being an experimentation in different gameplay experiences – so even if the first one is motorcycle-focused combat with outposts, it means the second will have that and it will be super polished, because we polished it through the feedback of everyone on the first game, but then also adds in this entirely new element."

Maybe *Human Element* will help Robert Bowling free himself of *Call of Duty*; maybe it will put Robotoki on the map as something other than 'the ex-*Call of Duty* guy's studio'. We've seen it happen with *Titanfall*, and with such a refreshing attitude to development and how to run a studio (mandatory days off on your birthday – though some people have still tried to come in to work) there is the groundwork in place – the sense of fun, of inventiveness, of exploration and experimentation – that could set *Human Element* up to be something of a dark horse for 2015. Whatever the case, it's unlikely to be just another online shooter featuring zombies. We hope.



A VISUAL GUIDE TO 2014

Crunching the numbers from the past twelve months of gaming, games™ presents the highs and lows of the year gone by

CONSOLE SALES MONTHLY

2,000,000
1,800,000
1,600,000
1,400,000
1,200,000
1,000,000
800,000
600,000
400,000
200,000
0

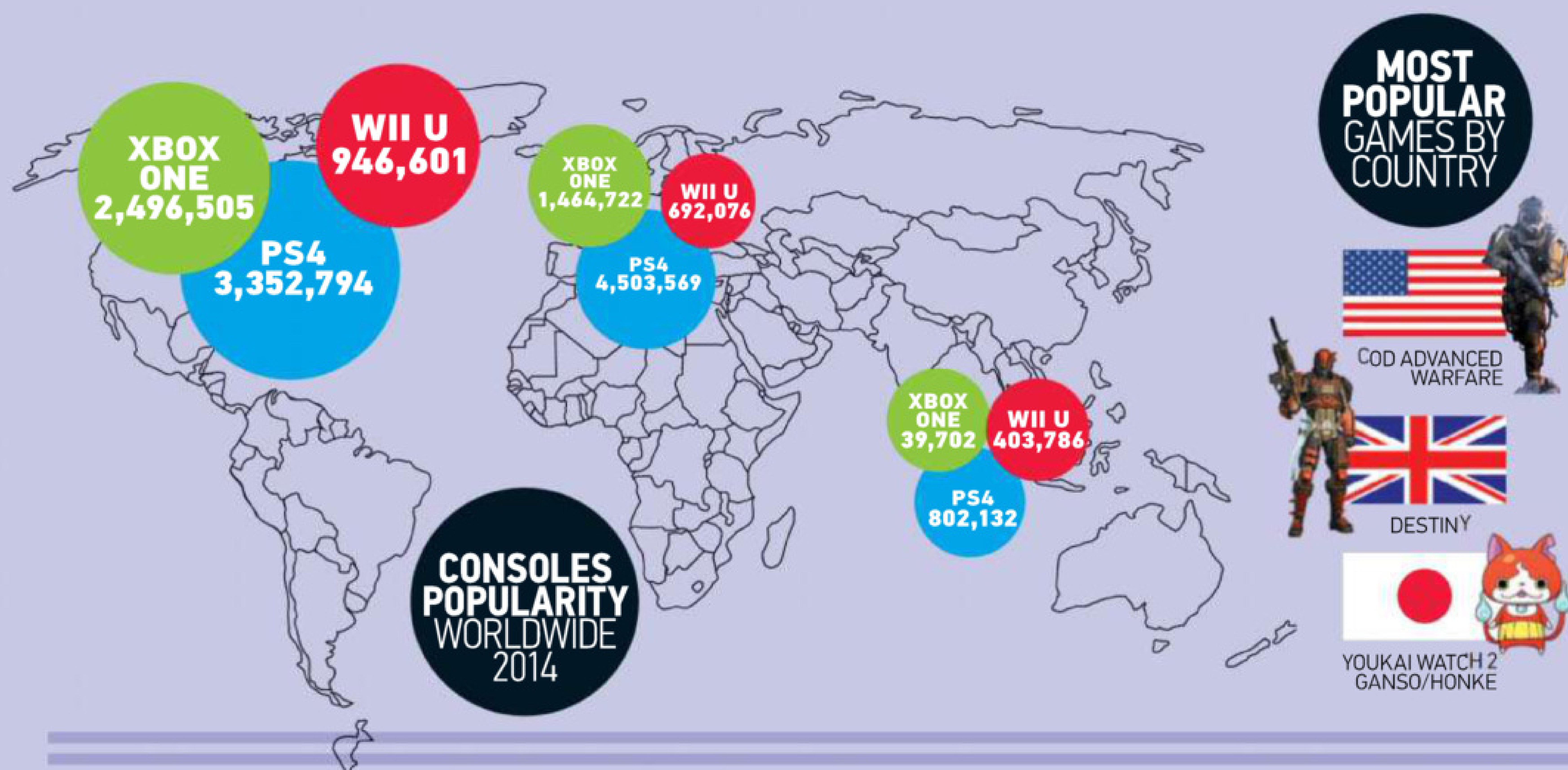
NOVEMBER 2013
DECEMBER 2013
JANUARY 2014
FEBRUARY 2014
MARCH 2014
APRIL 2014
MAY 2014
JUNE 2014
JULY 2014
AUGUST 2014
SEPTEMBER 2014
OCTOBER 2014
NOVEMBER 2014

TOTAL SALES

Console	Total sales
PS4	**16,146,005**
3DS	**12,015,270**
XBOX ONE	**9,133,686**
WII U	**3,906,530**
PS VITA	**3,001,171**

MOST POPULAR GAMES ON EACH CONSOLE

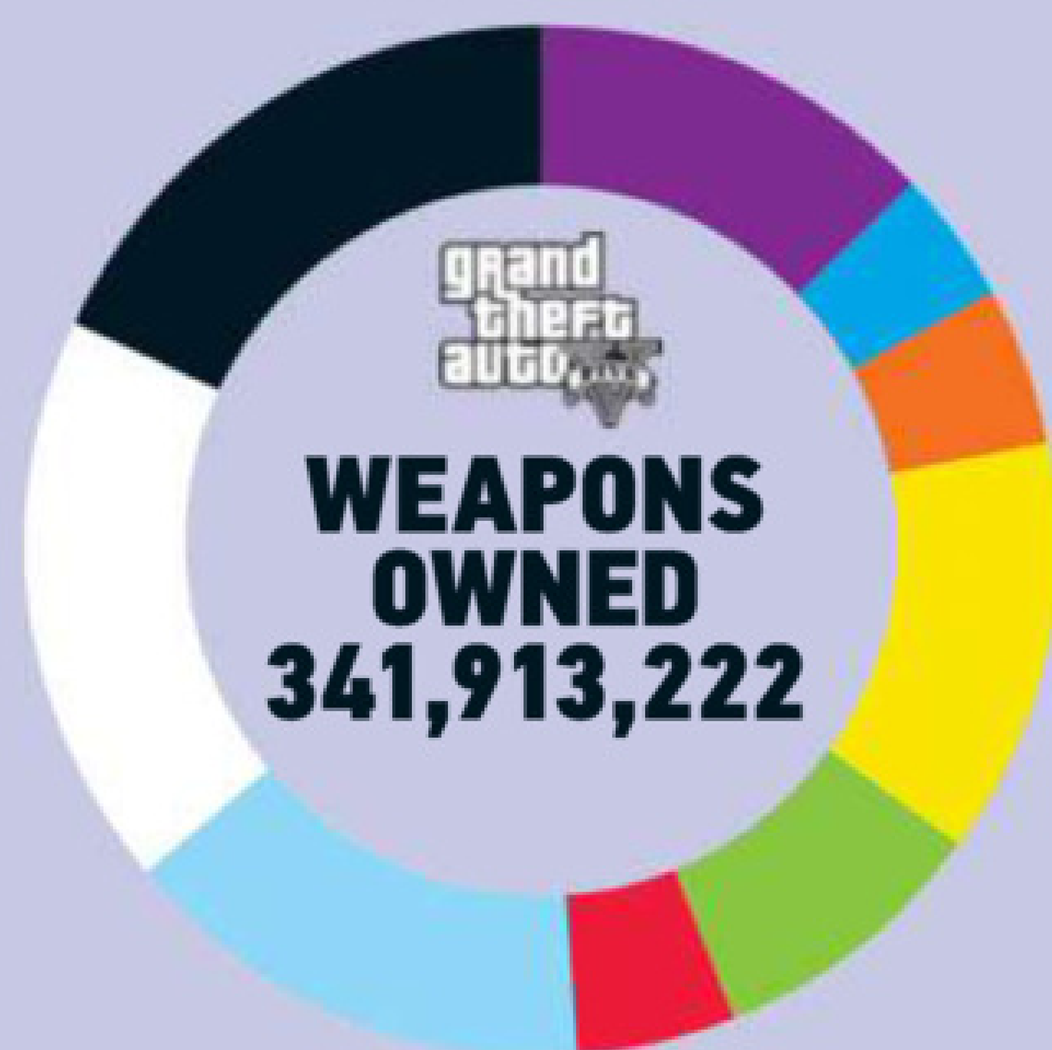




10 Most Popular Games Of The Year







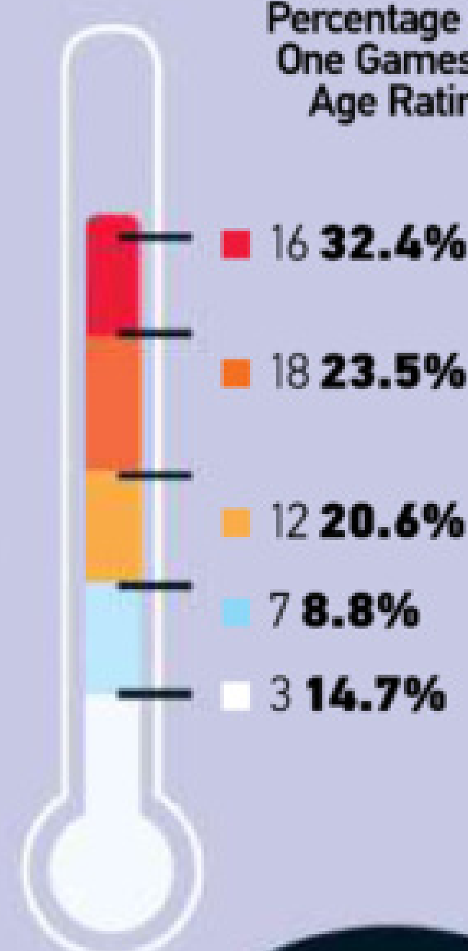
- Melee **13%**
- MG **4%**
- Heavy Weapons **5%**
- Handguns **13%**
- Shotguns **9%**
- Sniper Rifles **5%**
- SMG **15%**
- Projectiles **18%**
- Assault Rifles **18%**

SEX & THE SIMS 4

In The Sims 4 Players are making Woohoo approximately **42,000 times per hour**

VIOLENCE IN VIDEOGAMES

Percentage Of Number One Games Based On Age Rating (PEGI)



- 16 **32.4%**
- 18 **23.5%**
- 12 **20.6%**
- 7 **8.8%**
- 3 **14.7%**

THE TALLEST LOCATIONS 2014

The Himalayas (*Far Cry 4*)
8,848 m

Mt Chiliad (*GTA V*) **609.6m**

The Space Needle (*InFamous Second Son*)
184m

Notre Dame Cathedral (*Assassin's Creed Unity*)
96m

Cartman's Tent (*South Park: The Stick Of Truth*)
1.8m

MOST PROLIFIC PUBLISHERS IN TOP 100

NUMBER OF GAMES	Publisher
14	Nintendo
10	EA
8	SONY
6	UBISOFT
5	SQUARE ENIX / ACTIVISION

A DECADE OF



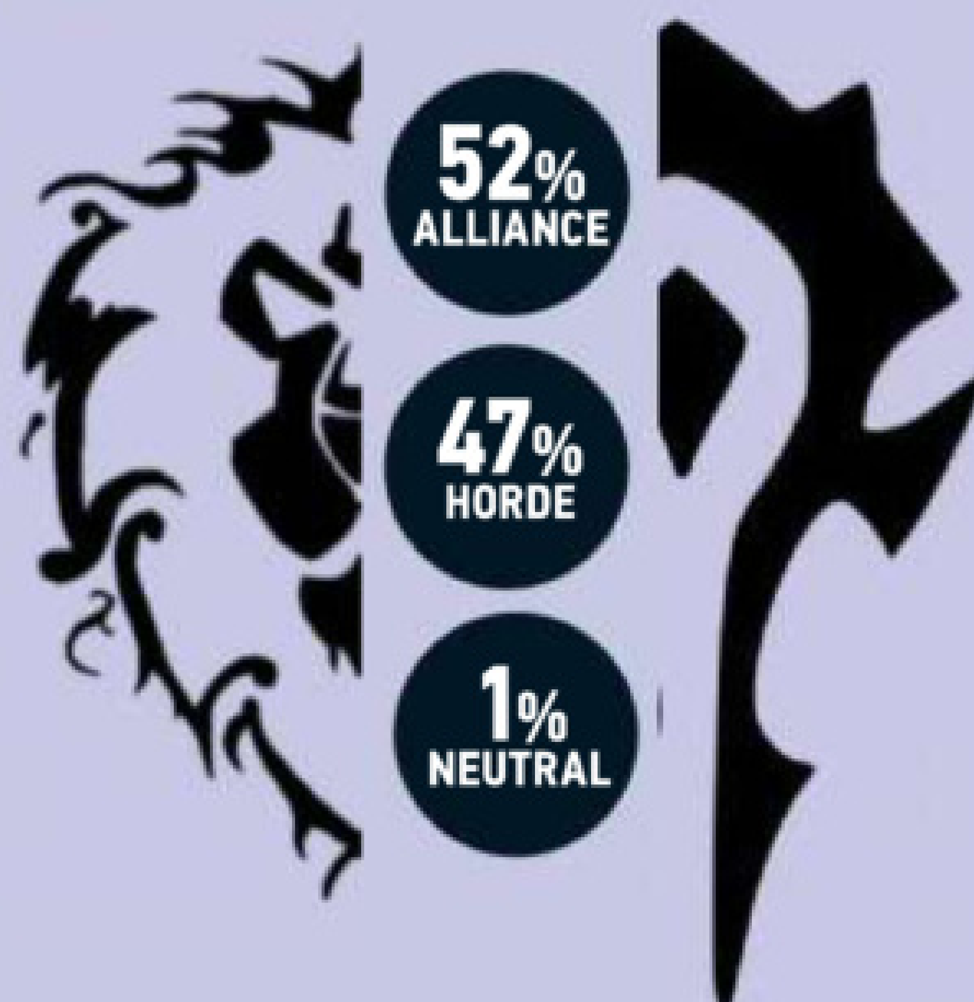
POPULATION MASS

500 million characters

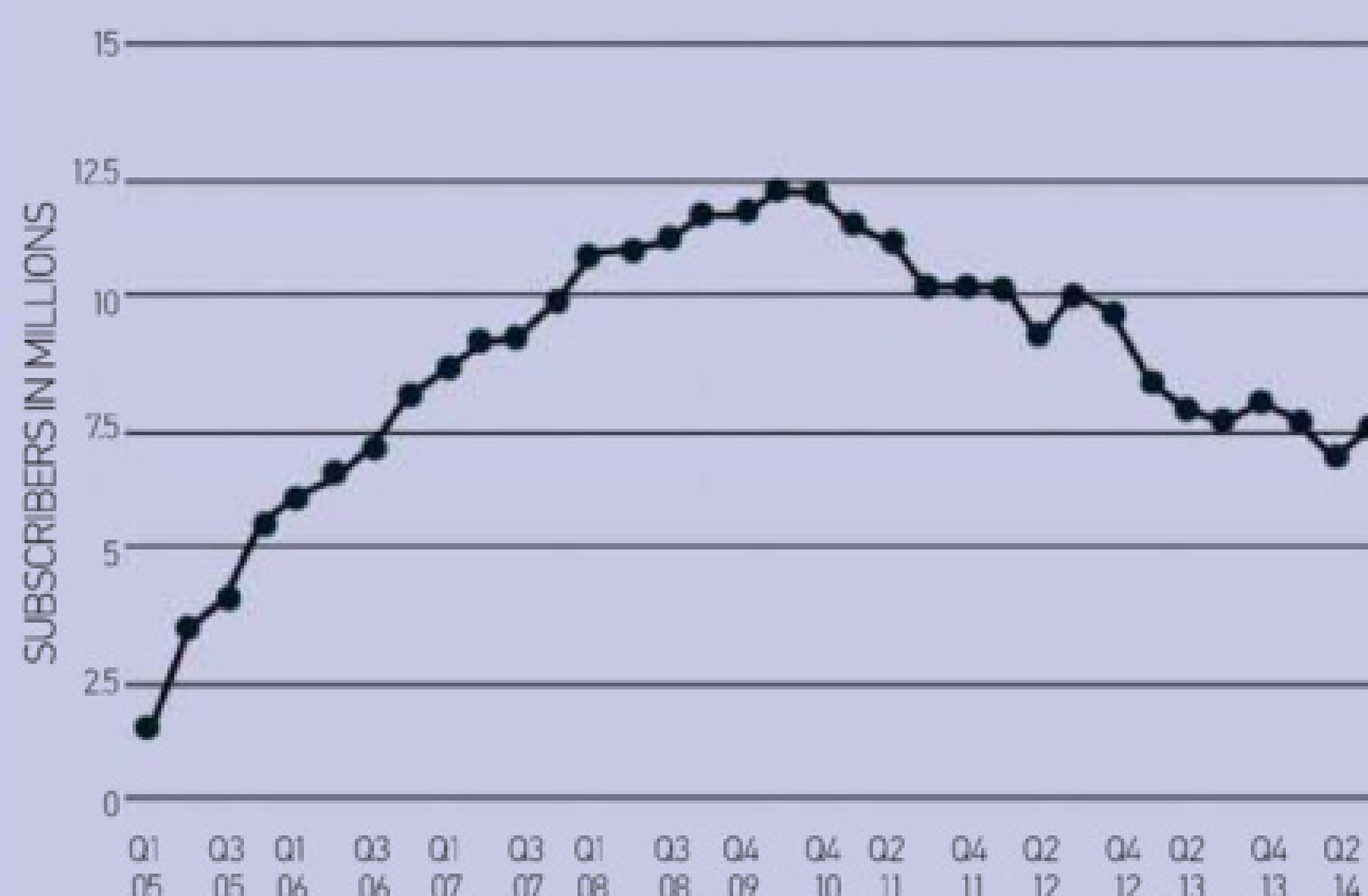
have been created in *WOW*. The United States only has a population of

316million

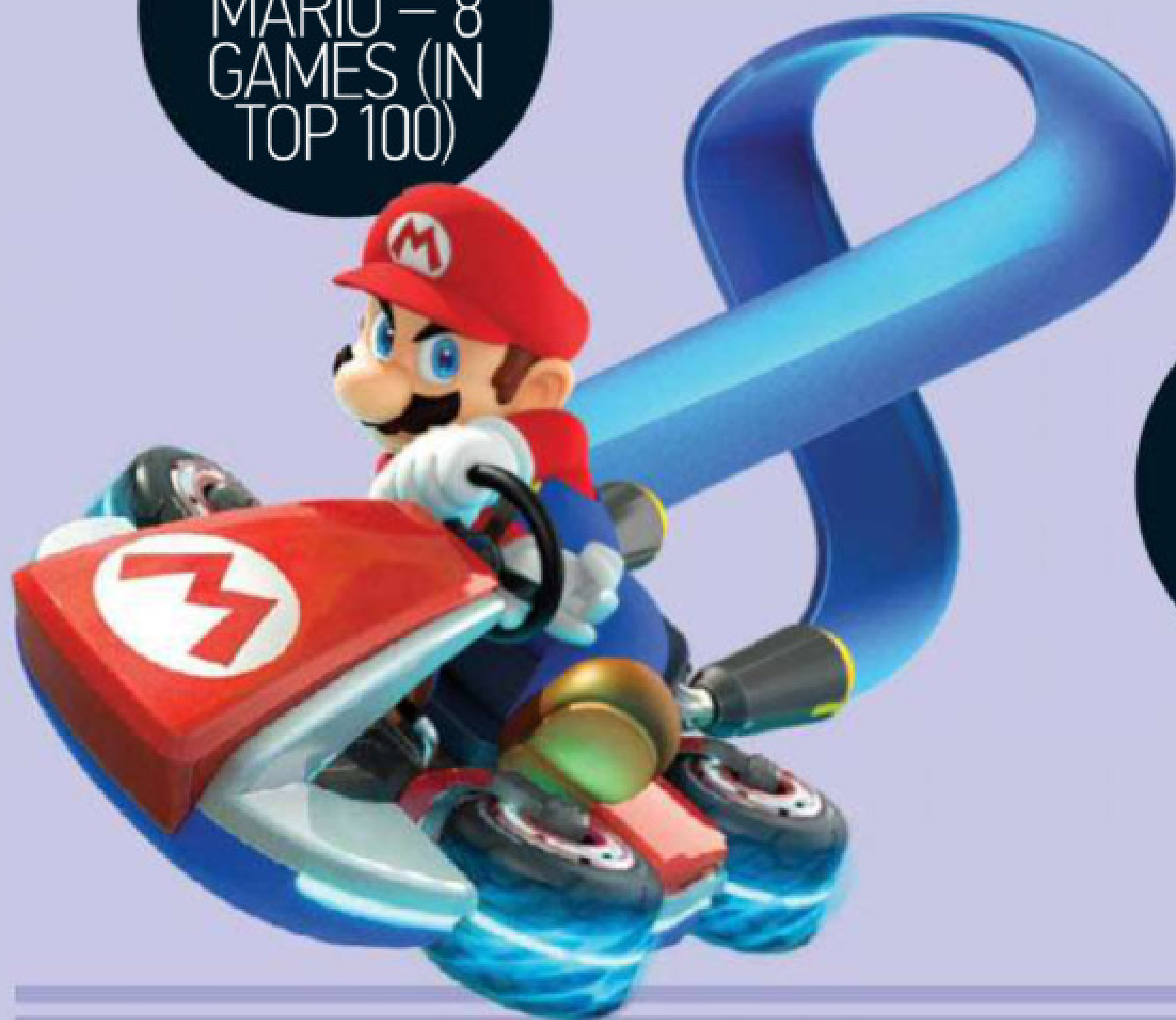
YOUR ALLEGIANCE



WOW SUBSCRIBERS SINCE LAUNCH



ICON OF THE YEAR
MARIO – 8 GAMES (IN TOP 100)



DARK SOULS II: DEATH BY NUMBERS

KILLED BY ENEMIES
253,311,675

FALLING
69,902,126



OTHER
20,725,112

DEFEATED BY OTHER PLAYERS
44,376,271

TRAPS
6,030,828





HUNGRY CAPITALISM THE BIGGEST BUYOUTS OF 2014

twitch



$970million (Amazon)



Oculus

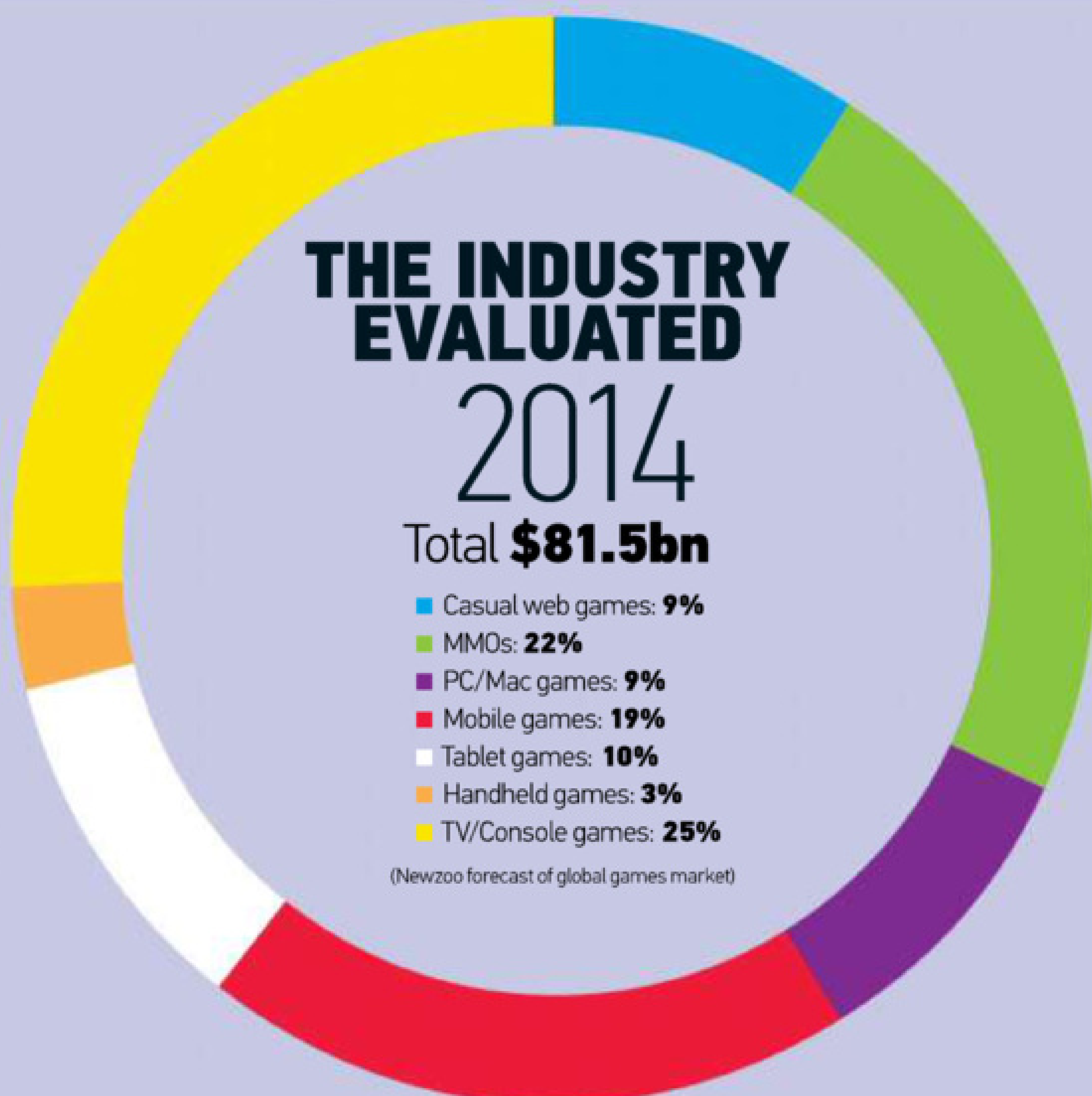


$2bn (Facebook)

MINECRAFT



$2.5bn (Microsoft)



THE INDUSTRY EVALUATED 2014

Total **$81.5bn**

- Casual web games: **9%**
- MMOs: **22%**
- PC/Mac games: **9%**
- Mobile games: **19%**
- Tablet games: **10%**
- Handheld games: **3%**
- TV/Console games: **25%**

(Newzoo forecast of global games market)

APPY DAYS MOBILE STATS

APP STORE DOWNLOADS THIS YEAR
25bn

GAMES MAKE **20.38%** OF TOTAL DOWNLOADS FROM APPSTORE

ANNUAL REVENUE OF KING.COM
$1,884.3m

SUPERCELL DAILY REVENUE (ESTIMATE)
$1,471,675







WHY I ♥...

STATE OF DECAY

PHIL ROBB, TURTLE ROCK, CO-FOUNDER AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR

“What this game did for me was that it fulfilled the part of the zombie fantasy that I was missing from Left 4 Dead*. That game was just about getting from point A to point B and killing loads of zombies. What* State Of Decay *gave me was the aftermath of that: it gave me the experience of living in the zombie apocalypse, along with all the survival stuff that went along with that. I think it’s an incredibly underrated experience. It’s a game that stuck in my head when I finished it, and has remained with me for some time since, too...”*

“This game fulfilled the part of the zombie fantasy that I was missing from Left 4 Dead”

PHIL ROBB, TURTLE ROCK, CO-FOUNDER AND CREATIVE DIRECTOR

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Reviews



102

SUPER SMASH BROS WII U

Nintendo delivers a grandstanding fighter experience as its full roster steps up to give Wii U another must-play game



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













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FREE DLC APPROACHES!

As if *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U* didn't already have enough content, Director Masahiro Sakurai has promised numerous other significant features to be added as free post-release download content. Top of the list is a tournament mode, which will allow you to set up your own custom online tournaments for up to 64 players, which is a big nod to the competitive scene, which has really embraced *Smash Bros.* in recent years. A new stage based on Miiverse is also due, with developer-moderated Miiverse messages set to appear in the stage as the fighting ensues. Also on the list of confirmed updates is online content sharing – the ability to share your custom-built stages, fighters, screenshots and replays online with other players.



Below: The Wii U version's stunning visuals are reason alone to grab it over (or as well as) the 3DS game. We were suitably impressed with the handheld effort, but the full-fat console version just looks beautiful in stunning 1080p at a solid 60 frames per second.



THE DEFINITIVE SMASH BROS. GAME HAS ARRIVED

Super Smash Bros. For Wii U

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Sora / Bandai Namco
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8 (1-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: SUPER SMASH BROS. FOR 3DS



WORSE THAN: MARIO KART 8

Here's the big question: if you already own *Super Smash Bros. for 3DS*, should you get the Wii U version? Simple answer: yes. Grab your wallet and get yourself to the shops. *Smash Bros. for Wii U* is all-encompassing. It's a serious competitive fighter, an insanely fun party game, an exercise in nostalgia and the biggest exhibition of Nintendo history imaginable – all on one disc. But more than anything, finally, it's a sequel worthy of the fan-favorite *Super Smash Bros. Melee*. It is, without a doubt, the definitive Smash Bros.

Gladly, the Wii U game doesn't try to re-invent the wheel. Series fans will revel in its signature gameplay; simple templated controls that are instantly approachable for newbies, yet allows more advanced players to dig deeper into the moves of each character and hone more high-level techniques. What *Super Smash Bros* on Wii U does do, however, is give you an unbelievable wealth of options. It has so much content it's bewildering. You've got – deep breath – the old-fashioned Smash fighting, solo Classic mode, All-Star mode, a new Event mode, Smash Tour, Special Orders mode, a Stage Builder, custom Miis, Amiibo fighters with learning AI, trophies, a challenges grid and Stadium mini games. And that's not all.

It's bursting at the seams with content. There are no fewer than 49 characters this time around. The selection is nothing short of astounding. Old Nintendo classics like Link, Captain Falcon and Kirby return with new faces including Pac-Man, Mega Man, the Animal Crossing Villager, Little Mac and more.

The only thing vaster than the playable roster is the game's soundtrack. With well over 300 tracks, *Super Smash Bros. for Wii U* is like a celebration of video game music. And this is acknowledged with a music player that lets you admire the entire soundtrack while you save your favourites in a separate list. You can even tweak the frequency with which various tracks play for each level.

Clearly, choice is the order of the day. But upon loading the disc up for the first time, you're very likely to make a beeline for the game's headline new feature; the eight-player Smash mode. Previous games in the series only ever allowed for a maximum of four players in a fight and that has always been enough for some chaotic fun. Doubling that player count is absolutely insane. It's often a challenge just keeping track of where your fighter is, let alone tracking the movements and tactics of other players. Throw in the chaos of items and enormous Final Smash moves and what you get is one big ball of bonkers.

Bigger levels have been crafted to accommodate eight-player fights, and each one is an awesome sight to behold. As players spread out, the camera pans away to reveal these huge worlds in all their HD glory. And, thanks to a crisp 1080p resolution – on a nice large TV – you can still keep track of what your little character is doing.

Levels like The Great Cave Offensive – a sprawling labyrinth of caves, pits and lava – are so large they can admittedly slow down play a bit too much. Also, the chaos of eight players all going mental on each other wipes out almost all possibility of carefully-planned strategic play. While the best players will usually emerge victorious, there's just too much going on to be totally in control of the battlefield. Eight-player Smash probably won't be making it onto the pro circuit, then.

But that's not what it's about; it's about getting together with friends and having a loud, trash-talking, shouty session of brawling, and for that you'll love it. Eight-player bouts are unfortunately not playable online, which is a shame. But let's not get too critical here – four-player Smash is brilliant

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ONLINE LOBBIES: The ability to pick an opponent based on rank or connection speed would be swell.
ADVENTURE MODE: We miss *SSB Melee*'s Adventure mode. Smash Tour is a decent try, but not as good.

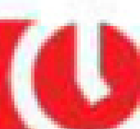
FOUR-PLAYER SMASH HAS ALWAYS BEEN ENOUGH FOR SOME CHAOTIC FUN. DOUBLING THAT PLAYER COUNT IS ABSOLUTELY INSANE

Below: Smash Tour is a new *Mario Party*-like board game for up to four players. You roll the dice and move around the board to collect fighter cards and stat buffs. At the end you use your cards to spawn characters in a final fight. It's decent, but it's no Adventure mode.



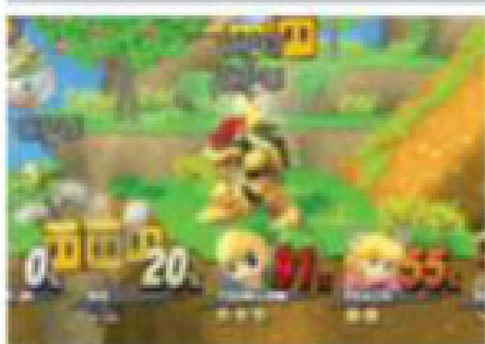
Above: We can see Mega Man becoming one of the favourites among the game's newly-added fighters. The horizontal-shooting robot can use various powers from his main series games, including the spinning blade, leaf shield and standard blaster.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS



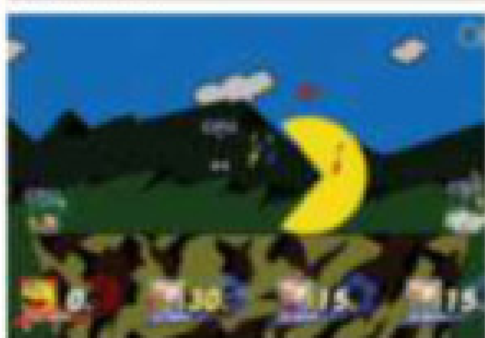
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

10 MINS



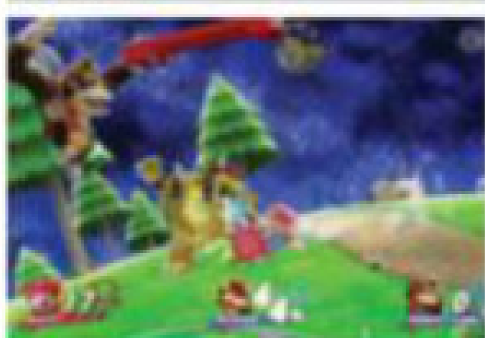
Your first port of call needs to be the all-new eight-player Smash fights. The chaos of eight friends in one room all battling is something you have to experience.

3 HOURS



Players with the master plan will spend their early hours working feverishly to unlock the game's massive selection of characters and stages. Luckily, it's not too difficult.

10 DAYS



With every character unlocked, you'll be playing online or with friends in the days, weeks and years to come. And then there's the enormous trophy collection to complete.



fun, and the ability to take it online means you'll never run out of human opponents to battle. And as you might expect, the Wii U entry also throws in plenty of online modes to enjoy.

The basic options let you play with friends or strangers via the 'With Anyone' matchmaking option. In public play, there are 'For Fun' unranked matches, and the more serious 'For Glory' mode, which introduces rankings in bouts on minimalist 'Omega' stages with items disabled. That's all about raw skill.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

CUSTOM FIGHTERS: If you own the 3DS version, you can transfer your custom fighters to Wii U.
TAKE CONTROL: Need controllers for eight players? The 3DS game can be used to control the Wii U one.

Nintendo has also added a neat little aside feature called 'Conquest', which tracks the wins and losses of three specific characters in online battles worldwide, tallying their performances over a short period and announcing a winner at its conclusion. All you have to do to participate is pick one of the three stipulated Conquest characters in any one time period and fight for wins. If the character that you played with the most wins the Conquest, you get rewards. And that's pretty sweet.

You don't even have to play the game to have fun with it online. The Spectate mode lets you watch others battle, and while you're there you can use your accumulated gold coins to place bets on who you think might win. It's so simple, but believe us – it's surprisingly addictive. Online play works pretty smoothly for the most part, but we wished it were possible to see a player's connection quality before entering a battle – playing with someone on a slow connection can be a painful mess of stuttering. Nintendo also maintains its policy of online silence. That makes it hard to co-ordinate with friends, but for many players, the lack of mouthy kids shouting expletives at each other Xbox Live-style is probably a good thing.

If you'd rather play it solo there's plenty to get stuck into. Classic mode is back, slapping you into a sequence of traditional fights ending with Master Hand. All-Star mode makes a return, with its fights against characters in chronological order. Stadium's mini games – the baseball-spoofing Home Run Contest and a new Target Blast mode – also offer a break from the fighting arena. Smash Tour, a new Wii U-exclusive mode that has players competing in a *Mario Party*-style board game, replaces the 3DS-only Smash Run mode. Players collect cards to acquire fighters, and items to boost the stats of those fighters, before throwing them into battle in a final winner-takes-all showdown. It's better than Smash Run, but still nowhere near the quality of Melee's Adventure mode.

As far as bonus modes go, the 'Events' mode is the best on offer here. Playable in solo

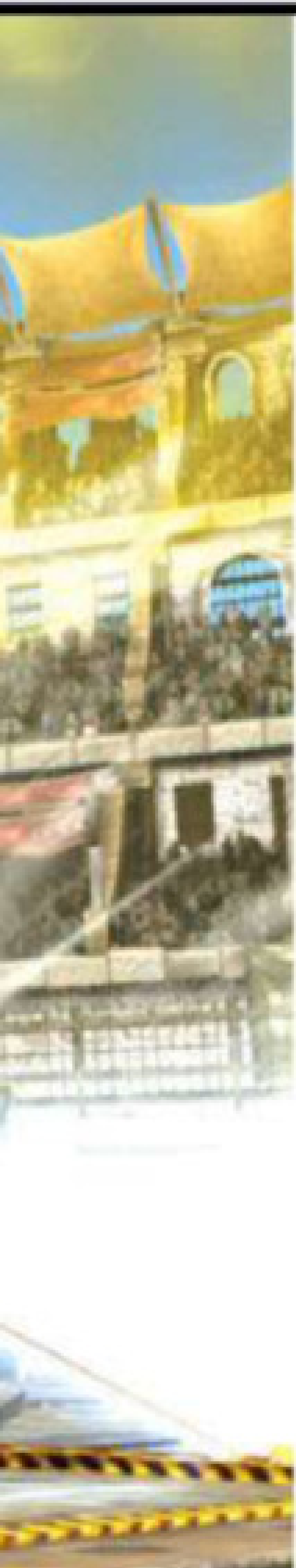
Below: The Event mode is by far the Wii U game's best solo activity, letting you take on quirky challenges that create interesting scenarios out of Nintendo's many franchises. In one mission, you have to use Pac-Man to gobble up six enemies in mere seconds.





Do you even Amiibo?

Super Smash Bros. for Wii U is Nintendo's most significant Amiibo game for now. Scanning the little guys into the game gives you a 'Figure Player' – a customisable version of that character which you must train up yourself. You 'feed' your 'FP' character with items that you earn in battle to boost their stats. It's like a mini RPG game, as you level up and watch them become more powerful. Most interestingly, FP fighters have learning AI, which means they will observe your fighting style and seek to fight just like you. It essentially becomes a virtual version of you, and it really seems to work.



Left: We may have lost Solid Snake from the *Metal Gear* series, but the new *Smash Bros.* has it's own fair share of third-party fighters.



Right: Custom Mii fighters are new to this year's *Smash Bros.* entrees. You take your own little fighter into an RPG-type mode in which you can equip items and add powers.







Left: The attention to detail is astonishing. It's the small touches, like when Mega Man dies with an explosion of blue balls – just like in his games.



Above: Who would win in a fight between Mario and Sonic? *Smash Bros.* has evolved greatly since its original conception as a debate-settler.



or as a two player co-op, Events throws you into fights with a surprisingly wacky range of scenarios and objectives. One minute you'll be using a giant Pac-Man to chomp through six enemies in 20 seconds, the next you'll be trying to trap two Animal Crossing Villagers with pitfall items.

As you do this, and everything else in the game for that matter, you'll earn rewards in the form of trophies for your virtual trophy cabinet (and your personal Nintendo history museum). You'll also earn the aforementioned gold coins, plus items that can be used to power up your own custom Mii fighters. Miis can be tuned to your play style as well, by tweaking their attack, defense and speed, and also equipping items that allow for special bonus abilities.

In addition to this, if you swipe an Amiibo figure over your GamePad then you'll unlock a whole other custom character mechanic; the fighter spawned will be your student, as it were. You'll fight against or alongside it, leveling up its powers as you go. According to Nintendo, this 'Figure Player' will even learn your play style by means of a simple AI and slowly grow to fight somewhat like you. It's a fun excursion to pit your Padawan against a friend, but it's not a revolution. That said, collecting Nintendo's little figures is half the fun in itself.

Super Smash Bros. for Wii U is a game that just keeps on giving. At it's core it's the simplest of fighting games, but its sheer wealth of content is almost daunting. It's not perfect; online multiplayer still harbours some niggling issues, and it still has no answer to Melee's brilliant Adventure mode. But if you love *Super Smash Bros.*, fighting games or even just Nintendo as a whole, you should snap up this game without a second thought. This is the best *Smash Bros.* game yet, and another stellar reason to own a Wii U.

IT'S THE SIMPLEST OF FIGHTING GAMES, BUT ITS SHEER WEALTH OF CONTENT IS ALMOST DAUNTING

FAQs

Q. EVERY NEW FIGHTER, PLEASE!

Sure! Wii Fit Trainer, Villager, Rosalina, Bowser Jr., Little Mac, Greninja, Palutena, Dark Pit, Lucina, Robin, Shulk, Duck Hunt Duo, Mega Man, Pac-Man and Mii Fighter.

Q. AND MEWTWO IS INBOUND?

MewTwo is so far the only "planned" paid DLC. The psychic-type Pokémon is due to arrive in 'Spring 2015'. Pricing unconfirmed.

Q. STAGE BUILDER ANY GOOD?

Not terrible, but not exactly *LittleBigPlanet*. You can draw levels with the stylus, but it's hard to be really creative. It's not what we'd hoped for.

VERDICT 9/10

THE BEST *SUPER SMASH BROS.* GAME YET.



Above: As in every driving game these days, planes and helicopters constantly flutter over your head to evoke tension and get the blood pumping.

IT'S NOT FINE. BUT IT'S OK

The Crew

A pretty respectable technical achievement masquerading as a piece of entertainment, *The Crew* is the last lot from Ubisoft's ample release slate for 2014; a year which has seen the launch of the French multinational's least artistically prosperous offerings in a very long time. Following a nearly unparalleled run of critical and commercial successes through 2011, 2012 and 2013, this year the company has started to feel like little more than a ruthless assembly line. Every element that most people now expect from a triple-A Ubisoft release is present and correct here; the insane abundance of side activities, the abundance of exposition-heavy cinematics when precisely none are required, the not-so-polite abundance of microtransactions. *Assassin's Creed: Unity* may be one of 2014's defining follies, but at least it wasn't this boring.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Playstation 4, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ivory Tower, Ubisoft Reflections
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

And in addition to being boring, *The Crew* is also deeply, deeply confused. It's a gloomy action thriller in which murderous mafioso characters speak as if they're auditioning for *The Simpsons*. It's a game so desperate to appear "realistic" that its streets are littered with pedestrians, only their duck, dive and dodge animations are so poorly implemented that you often just pass through them as if they were ghosts. The weather can shift convincingly on some occasions, and then move at 100x normal speed on others. *The Crew* wants to approximate the take-no-prisoners nihilism of *Grand Theft Auto*, at the same time as recreating the warm glow of one of Criterion's cheerful crime-tinged racers; all of which are about as dark and edgy as an instalment of *Police Academy*, and are all the better for it.

IT'S DEFINED BY ITS LACK OF CHARACTER. IT'S AN UBISOFT GAME FIRST AND A DRIVING GAME SECOND

But the lack of an engaging personality probably won't deter anyone who was utterly seduced by the publisher's original pitch. If the notion of racing across the United States of America with a handful of friends still excites you, then *The Crew* delivers. Or rather, *The Crew* delivers when it's functioning properly. Online headaches have been alarmingly prevalent over the launch period, and the most common issue – where a skittish server annihilates your progress during the final moments of a half-hour long race – makes for an incomparably bitter pill.

So it's perhaps best to view the game as a piece of digital tourism. The map is

FAQs

Q. IS IT ALWAYS ONLINE?

Yes. This tends to cause problems when you're racing in one of the many events that last over half an hour.

Q. HOW'S THE SOUNDTRACK?

It's adequate but there really aren't enough tracks on it. Songs start repeating after barely a couple of hours.

Q. HOW DOES IT LOOK?

Passable. Compared to some of the current competition, it looks like it belongs on a previous hardware generation.



Below: Almost every road in the game is littered with opportunities to level up. You'll pass through a barrier every few minutes and be thrown into a slalom, a jump contest or some other assessment of your driving expertise.



Right: The origins of the 5-10 Crew – the gang that you're trying to get in – is the only aspect of the plot that's interesting.



Below: Opening up new portions of the map involves hunting down hidden satellite dishes.



not a mirror of the USA but rather a smart reconstruction of it, with the biggest cities melded together via some extremely picturesque fantasy cement. You won't find Boston or Austin or Philadelphia here, but players searching for the country's most famous landmarks will be extremely well served. Completing a leisurely cruise from New York to Miami in one hit makes every other driving game in existence feel like a cheap toy, but that very scenario, when the game basically acts as an empty shell, is the only occasion that *The Crew* feels like a project that was born of real thoughtfulness and flair.

A game like this patently does not require a narrative, let alone a narrative that frequently feels like a shot-for-shot remake of EA's truly lousy 2011 offering *Need for Speed: The Run*. As was the case with that game, there's little point in highlighting just how offensively, maddeningly dumb *The Crew*'s plot is because most people who play it will ignore most of the story content anyway. Let's just leave it at this: it appears to have been written by an eight-year-old child with designs on being the next Guy Ritchie. It is abnormally poor.

A vastly more detrimental problem is that the handling model just isn't rewarding. You are constantly unlocking new cars and then upgrading them at a rapid pace (often completely on the fly) and yet almost every car in the game, at every stage of its upgrade process, basically feels like the last one. Even if your perk tree ends up being lop-sided in favour of steering and clutch bonuses, the difference it makes is utterly negligible. It's a clear attempt to level the playing field that merely robs the experience of yet more precious personality.

There's no variety in the missions either. Races are bereft of excitement because your AI opponents don't even come close to creating the illusion of competition: they drive at impossible speeds when you're starting to win, and slam into walls like idiots when you're losing. The police chases are ripped straight from *Watch Dogs* and are as hellishly unfair as they were in that game, and the takedown missions involve robotically learning enemy route patterns instead of demanding high-speed invention and problem-solving.

Matchmaking is adequate, and replicates the *GTA V* system in which you ping players in your vicinity to request assistance with a mission. The reason this worked so well in *GTA* is because, in addition to having eager players in rich abundance, it also tended to look further afield if you couldn't find anyone to join you locally. In *The Crew*, everything hinges on the small number of players in your version of the world, and assembling a four-player crew annoyingly involves quite a bit of work. As with something like *Destiny*, signing up with friends already in tow is basically mandatory if you want to get the most from your experience with the game.

In the end, *The Crew* is defined by its unmitigated lack of character. It's an Ubisoft game first and a driving game second, and has arrived at a point at which it's facing off against *Forza Horizon 2* and *DriveClub* for most people's affections. With the former's more clearly defined vision and mechanics, and even with the latter's terrible teething problems, it is absolutely no contest in both cases. Personality continues to go a very, very long way.

MISSING LINK

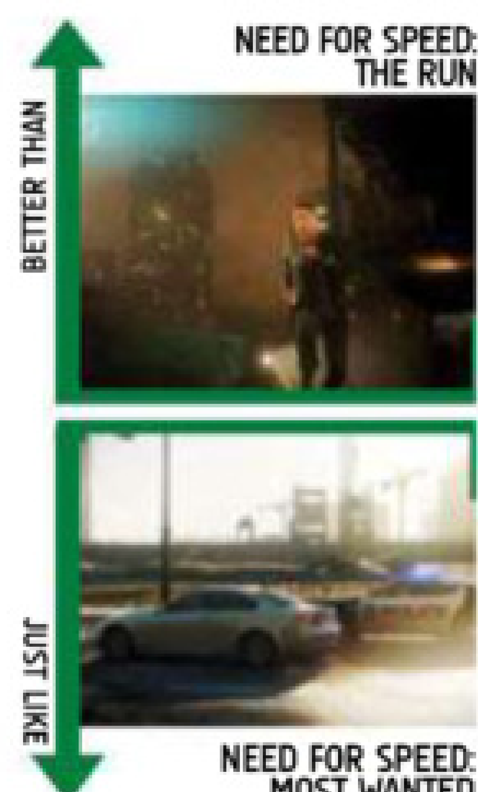
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SWITCHEROO: In every driving game, the speedometer and the mini-map are on the left and the right respectively. Here, they're mirrored solely to create another vague point of difference.

SKY HIGH. WHY?

For no clear reason, your racing line in *The Crew* is rendered in baby blue and floats approximately ten in-game feet above your vehicle. This appears to be an act of outright desperation, an attempt to give the project a talking point by doing something that nobody has ever done before. But it just isn't practical; the line persistently wriggles and flits around like a snake under a boot, and will often send you in the wrong direction when you're racing in busy and built-up areas. It also clutters up the screen and looks plain ugly.

BETTER THAN: NEED FOR SPEED: THE RUN



JUST LIKE: NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED

VERDICT 5/10

NOT TERRIBLE – JUST SO VERY DISAPPOINTING.

SPACESHIP. SPACESHIP. SPACESHIP!

Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham

If *Lego Batman 3* proves nothing else, it's that the decade-old style, started with *Lego Star Wars*, remains as inviting to play as ever. The Traveller's Tales team continues to deliver no matter what franchise it's spinning. The once modest studio hidden away in the leafy Cheshire town of Knutsford has transformed into one of the industry's true powerhouses, having a hand in televised animation, and surely even informing the wildly successful *Lego Movie* with its brand of charming, sharp humour. In that time, we've seen the Lego series morph from basic hack-and-slash nothingness to sprawling open world behemoth, and it hit its peak with last year's spectacular *Lego Marvel Super Heroes*. Where to go, then, for *Lego Batman 3*? Well, as the subtitle handily tells us, we're going beyond Gotham. All the way into space, in fact.

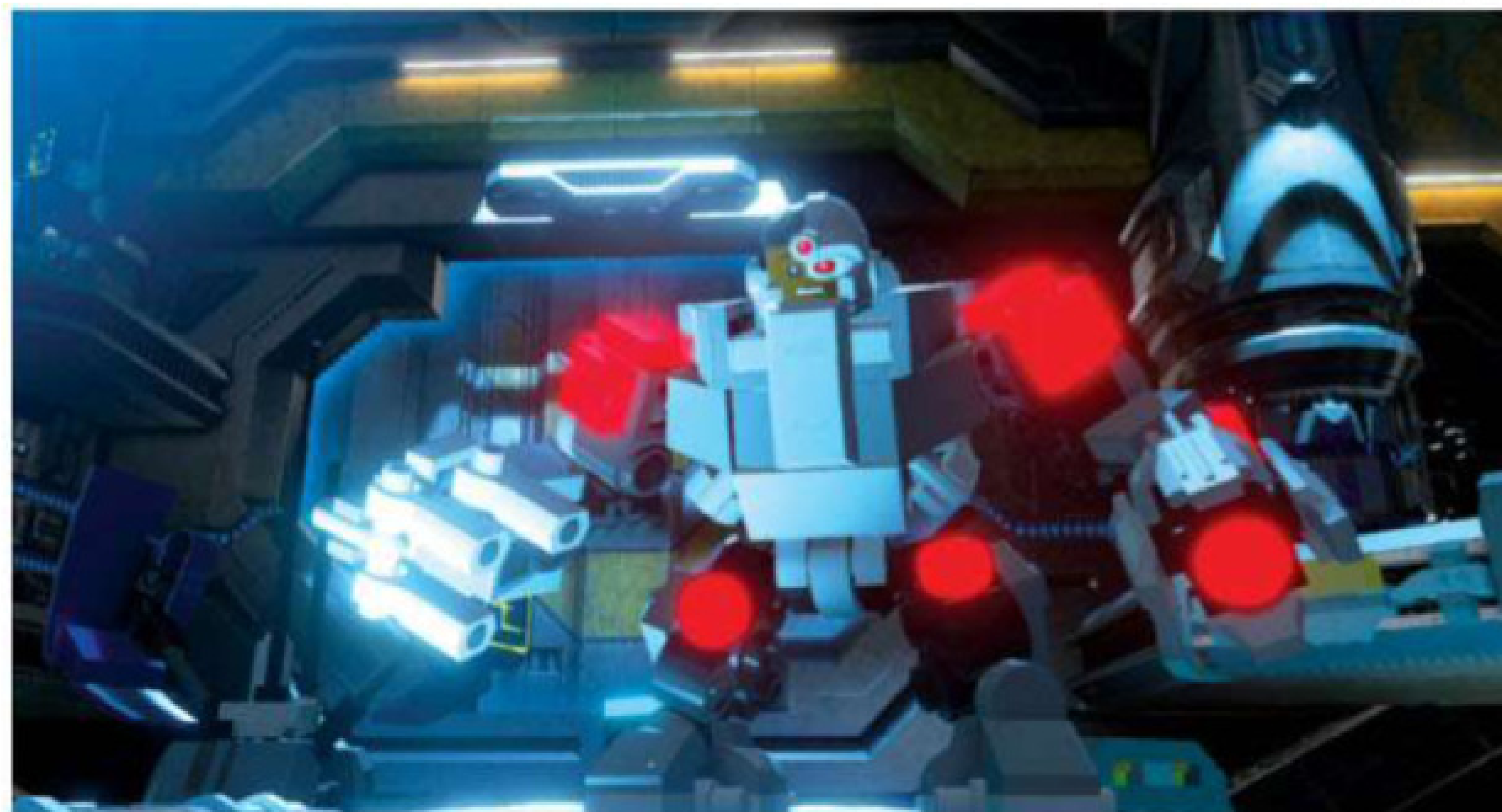
Before you get too excited, Traveller's Tales hasn't turned the entire galaxy into perfectly-formed plastic bricks, but the Dark Knight and his Justice League cohorts do indeed burst out over Gotham's seams and into the great black unknown. Sadly, this means *Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham* is a more staid affair than its predecessor in many ways. With no open world to explore, we are offered a series of classic Lego levels, where players use their characters' various special abilities to solve lighthearted puzzles, bash up a few enemies and enjoy the cutscenes.

It all begins very slowly. Batman and Robin are out to stop Killer Croc, and have to plod through the sewers on his path. It's a way to introduce the various costumes that each character can unlock, which act as different powers, much like in the Wii U's *Lego City Undercover*. From there, a trudge through an overly-long section in the Batcave, a plod through the Halls Of Justice, and then finally, into space. While the quality of the visuals, production and writing can't be faulted, the standard of puzzling and stop-start flow of the action can be tiresome, especially if you've come from Marvel or indeed *Lego Batman 2*. Be warned, too, that *Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham* can be fiddly if you're playing with young children – some of the puzzles that require cooperation require a level of dexterity that may be above the very young, which can lead to frustration for both you and your kid.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, Xbox 360, PS3, PC, Mac
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros
DEVELOPER: Traveller's Tales
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: Can you find the forlorn figure of Adam West in each level? His cries for help are sadder than a Christmas advert.



Above: DC fans will be overwhelmed by the number of references and nods to their lore. It's staggering how much is in here.



Once you do manage to get out into space, though, the action picks up dramatically, and allows Traveller's Tales to really enjoy itself creatively. A chap called Brainiac has decided he wants to take over Earth, much to the chagrin of the (hilariously smug) Green Lantern and his ring-bearing buddies. Batman and the rest of the Justice League fire themselves into space to try and stop him.

Even on an early space level set on the outside of a rocket, it's clear Traveller's Tales is enjoying itself. That particular level operates with a *Super Mario Galaxy* appreciation of

Right: The visuals are truly beautiful at times – the power of the PS4 allowing for a sheen and polish that makes the figures look almost real. And the animation, as always, is utterly fantastic.

THE LEVEL OF CHARACTERISATION AND CHARM OOZING OUT OF THE GAME'S EVERY PLASTIC PORE IS TYPICALLY HIGH





FAQs

Q. HOW MANY CHARACTERS?
150 DC comics gals, guys and aliens are there to unlock.

Q. SAME GAMEPLAY AS EVER?
Yes, although there are some interesting spin-off sections.

Q. WHO IS MARTIAN MANHUNTER?
Not many people know. Best do some research.



KEEP TALKING

For many years, the Lego games eschewed voice work in favour of 'silent movie' type comedy where facial reactions and slapstick ruled the day. The recent games have rounded up the industry's best voice actors to yap through fantastic dialogue, and *Lego Batman 3* is no different. The man of a thousand voices (and games), Troy Baker, is on board as Batman, and joined by Christopher Cory Smith doing an excellent Joker, Josh Keaton a fantastic Green Lantern, and even the original Batman, Adam West, playing himself. The comedy lands perfectly throughout, with familiar characters lightly mocked without ever veering too far into parody, and there are just endless gags. World class stuff, truly.



gravity, as you move around the outside of the rocket, while later levels set in the Green Lantern's home world allow the artists to flex their muscles and deliver areas that are far more interesting to look at than the early game's metallic interiors.

Unfortunately, the creativity of the environments rarely spreads to the gameplay. While *Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham* probably offers the greatest variety of puzzles in the series' history, and also its most intricate, this is still a game of placing the right character in the right place, and pressing the right button. The occasional headscratcher tends to arise because the game's signposting lets it down, rather than some *Zelda*-level ingenious conundrum. Now, these are games designed for children, or more specifically to be played cooperatively with children, so they shouldn't be too taxing, but *Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham* can occasionally be a little tedious. Puzzles are good, but busy work isn't.

There are periods where the game feels like a step back for the 'series' (if putting all Lego games together can be considered a series). Obviously the production values are far higher than the *Star Wars* games, or *Lego Indiana Jones*, but the lack of true scope is a touch disappointing. Thankfully, the level of characterisation and charm oozing out of the game's every plastic pore is typically high. Performances from a who's who of gaming acting talent are universally fantastic, doing Traveller's Tales' script justice and delivering a steady flow of gags, references and very nerdy nods to all things DC – so nerdy, in fact, that you'd have to be the most super of super fans to even know who most of the characters are.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CLOSED OFF: The lack of a proper open world does hurt the game – being able to soar through the streets as Superman is something that should always be an option.

Still, praise must always go to Traveller's Tales for its representations of the characters at its disposal. Batman's brooding grumpiness doesn't quite go as far as Will Arnett's hilarious turn in the Lego Movie, but it isn't far off, while just the mere sight of the Green Lantern's strut is enough to crack us up every single time we see it. A particular shout must go out to Cyborg, too, who is clearly the most capable superhero of the bunch (not including 'cheat mode' Superman), yet rarely gets any credit. He's such a nice chap that he doesn't seem to mind, thankfully.

And *Lego Batman 3: Beyond Gotham* is nothing if not affable. This is highly polished, confident and competent stuff. It may not be as expansive as recent iterations, but Traveller's Tales does not make bad videogames, and this is absolutely no exception.

VERDICT 7/10
A STEP BACKWARDS, BUT STILL SOLID AS A BRICK

AT LEAST SHE'S ACTUALLY RAIDING TOMBS

Lara Croft And The Temple Of Osiris

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Crystal Dynamics
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
ALL ZOMBIES MUST DIE!



WORSE THAN
LARA CROFT AND THE GUARDIAN OF LIGHT

Hokey supernatural silliness is undeniably a key part of *Tomb Raider*'s DNA. Just as nobody dare question the science in things like *Indiana Jones* or *Big Trouble In Little China,* Lara's games have a way of presenting impossible situations without feeling the need to justify or explain them. It's what allows the games to introduce dinosaurs without needing to go into how or why they have miraculously survived until now only to be shot in the face, or what lets magic and alchemy masquerade as real things without having to get bogged down in logic and other such boring stuff and nonsense. There's certainly an argument to be made, though, that Lara's latest outing might take things a step or ten too far – it's one thing to allude to myths and legends to make artefacts and lore cooler than they actually are, but it's quite another to bring them to life and offer two playable Ancient Egyptian deities who run around with machine guns, endlessly pushing blocks and balls into the correct places because videogames.

In case you failed to gather from that previous statement, *Temple Of Osiris* is a silly game. A very silly game indeed, in fact – one where you'll fight giant beetle gods on rolling spheres and run away from rampaging bosses not because you're actually scared of them (it's hard to find a crocodile with a mane anything other than amusing, if we're honest) but simply because the screen won't stop moving and you need to keep up. But being silly is by no means a negative – it's just not all that easy to work out what this surprise sequel actually *is*.

The template has changed little since *Guardian Of Light*, so the isometric viewpoint, twin-stick shooter mechanics and co-op



Above: Levels are all styled up as unique tombs, each with their own themes, perils and enemies.

Below: No *Mario Galaxy* hijinks to be had here – go too far down the side of the ball and you're thrown coldly back to the last checkpoint.



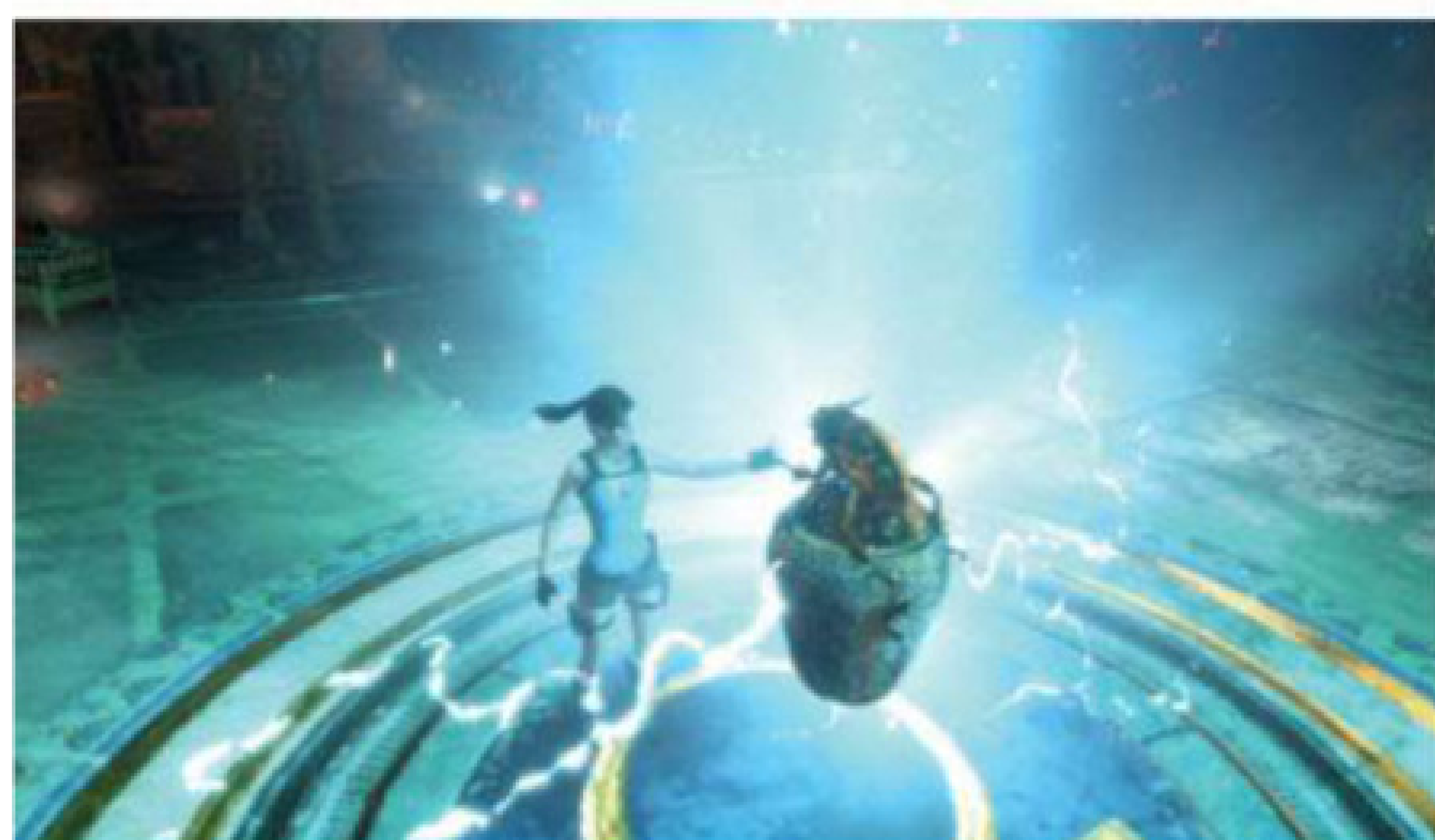
FAQs

Q. FOUR-PLAYER SUPPORT?
Indeed. Puzzles are altered based on the number of players, which is cool, but action gets a bit too chaotic to really see what's going on.

Q. WAIT, LOOT?
For some reason, trinkets that alter your characters' abilities are random rewards from chests that must be opened with gems. Save up for the big gold boxes if you know what's good for you.

Q. AS GOOD AS GUARDIAN OF LIGHT?
No, sadly. Controls don't feel as tight and while puzzling with four can be fun, action just gets a bit messy. The opposite is true of solo play, oddly.

Below: Beat the bosses and collect all the glowing trinkets and you might just be able to revive Osiris.



Boss Rush

Battles against giant bugs, huge snake things and the like are the clear highlight of *Temple Of Osiris* – general gameplay might be a little on the dull side but these boss battles are, on the whole, a lot of fun. They can get pretty chaotic with two or more players but that's sort of the point and so long as you all know what you're doing (and don't blink), you should get through to all the delicious loot that lies in the chambers beyond. It must be said, though, that the gimmick-based boss battles can be a slog in single-player. Redirecting light beams with retractable mirrors while avoiding heavy fire is easy enough with multiple players, for instance, but becomes a chore when playing alone.

JUGGLING SO MANY DIFFERENT GAMEPLAY ELEMENTS LEAVES THE GAME FEELING LIKE A BIT OF A LARA-OF-ALL-TRADES

focus will all be somewhat familiar to many players. The problems lies, however, in the fact that juggling so many different gameplay elements leaves the game feeling like a bit of a Lara-of-all-trades. Shooting is passable at best but never really manages to satisfy, platforming is weak for the same reason the *Lego* series (and its characters) fall down – depth perception is a nightmare and judging any jump is more luck and experience than skill – and puzzles are only as enjoyable as your current player count allows them to be.

Played solo, it's actually pretty dull. Lara gets all the abilities she needs to waltz through the world with ease from the off, so there's little thinking to do on your way to the credits. Invite a friend and things vastly improve, with obstacles that require both participants to work together to use both the practical and the magical in harmony in order to progress.

Even so, there are no real *Portal 2* 'Eureka!' moments to be found and solutions are generally either pretty simple or somewhat contrived. But even when you do manage to figure them out, execution isn't always as easy as you might hope. Physics-based tasks can be frustrating when objects don't behave as they obviously should, something only exacerbated when timers come into play. This trial-and-error method of blasting things into holes feels more like a Nineties golf game than a modern videogame puzzle and there's little in the way of accomplishment to take away from a boss battle where something just happened to fall into the right place at the right time.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EXTREME CLOSE-UP: The zoomed-out camera angle makes sense when you've got four players running around and stuff going on all over the shop but playing alone everything just feels distant.

We're not entirely sure what the random loot drops really add to the game, either. Rings offer personal buffs while amulets convey team-wide benefits for an ill-explained period, and both can be grabbed from chests of varying quality throughout the game. Gems seem to be better saved for the more expensive ones, since the RNG here makes *Destiny*'s Cryptarch seem positively generous in comparison. It's far from difficult in the first place but a lucky drop can turn this into a cakewalk. And while you'll need a suite of top-notch gear to get through on harder difficulties, the fact that luck is the only way to earn these items feels like just another nail in Skill's coffin.

It'd be remiss to not acknowledge the ingenious way in which puzzles and layouts are altered based on the number of players, with obstacles that require complete team cooperation often the most fun to figure out and overcome. You'll need to grind for gems anyway if you want anything half-decent out of the random loot chests, so at least this offers a degree of variety for when you do so – bring a friend or three to a level you previously played solo and you'll have a different (and most likely better) experience as you fill your pockets with shiny things for another roll of the loot dice.

It's often said that co-op makes any game better but in this case, co-op is the *only* way to glean any enjoyment from the game at all. Played alone, *Temple Of Osiris* struggles to evade box-ticking tedium and it's only when confusion and banter come into play that it's even worth considering. And even then, you're going to want to be playing with headset-equipped allies (in lieu of any in-game visual communication method) to make sure that you're all on the same page. Where *Guardian Of Light* made a good case for playing with friends, its sequel positively demands it and if you aren't planning on playing with friends, you're probably better off not playing at all.



VERDICT 5/10
MULTIPLAYER OR BUST

FOR THE HORDE!

World Of Warcraft: Warlords Of Draenor

Below: Launch-week problems aside, the servers have been running incredibly well. Despite the heavy use of phasing, *Warlords* still effortlessly makes you feel part of a larger community.

DETAILS
FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Blizzard Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively multiplayer
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



***Warlords Of Draenor* is a potent reminder that Blizzard Entertainment is capable of more than resting on its irrefutable reputation.** After a decade of developing *World Of Warcraft*, it would have been all too easy for the studio to simply churn out a sixth expansion. Admittedly, that wasn't outside of the realms of possibility: after the massive innovations introduced through 2007's *The Burning Crusade* and 2008's *Wrath Of The Lich King*, Blizzard seemed to settle into a steady – if unpredictable – rhythm. A solid, but by no means revolutionary, expansion would arrive like clockwork every two years – with 2012's *Mists Of Pandaria* lackluster content and simplified mechanics offering the biggest hint that the studio might be beginning to wind *World Of Warcraft* down.

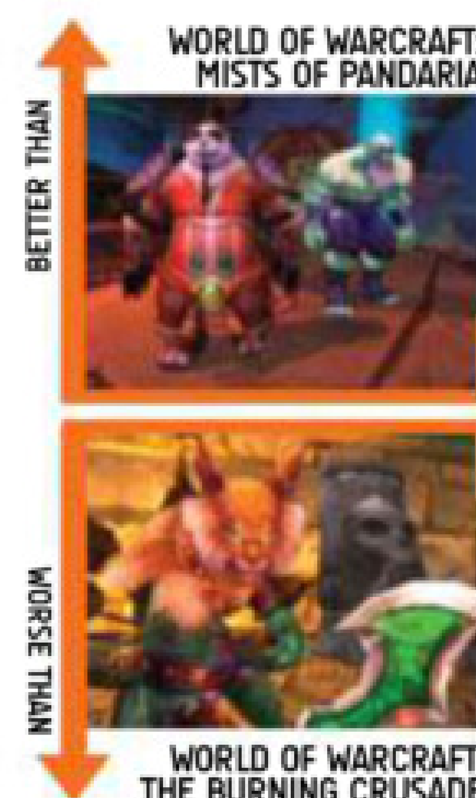
But *Warlords Of Draenor* is a grand statement of intent. Blizzard has reemerged as the king of a genre it never really lost control of. It has combined the raw ambition we first saw back in *The Burning Crusade* and matured it with seven years of skill, refinement and genre expertise. It's feels like the first major leap forward for *World Of Warcraft* since the Lich King was brought to his knees. The core gameplay has been tweaked in brilliantly subtle ways, the nostalgia-fuelled plot is one of the strongest we've seen to date, and it's clear Blizzard has been paying close enough attention to its competitors to prove it can still do MMOs better than anyone else.

That 'nostalgia-fuelled' narrative is one of the biggest appeals of *Warlords Of Draenor*, in fact story plays a bigger part here than it has done in any previous expansion. It pays homage not only to the developments of *World Of Warcraft*'s ten-year epic storyline, but also to the franchise's 20-year legacy. Garrosh Hellscream, fresh from his defeat during *Mists Of Pandaria*, travels back through time to the orc homeworld of Draenor – and while it's unashamedly silly, seeing Garrosh take control of the orc invasion that started the entire *Warcraft* timeline back in 1994 is pretty awe-inspiring.

It feels epic, with long quest lines book-ended by beautiful cutscenes like never before. These brief moments of respite from *Warlords*' breakneck pace do a wonderful job of keeping you engaged with the story – especially if you're one of the many quest-text-adverse players. It was an important step, because newbie players could quite easily feel lost under two decades of characters, faction rivalries and storylines – instead, the cutscenes make it easy to understand and follow. In fact, for the first time in seven years questing doesn't feel like it's been designed to manage your levelling progress. Your journey from level 90-100 has a real sense of progression that appeals to every player – not just the lore junkies and RP-server fanatics.

"WARLORDS IS THE ULTIMATE CELEBRATION OF THE WARCRAFT FRANCHISE'S 20-YEAR LEGACY"

Despite being one of *Warlords*' most appealing features, the narrative isn't this expansion's massive innovation. That praise goes to the five wonderful zones you'll find yourself adventuring through. In many ways, we can see the evolution of *Mists*' 2013 *Timeless Isle* update pervading through every aspect of *Warlords*. To recap: *Timeless Isles* was designed to quickly get new players' Raid level gear to catch up with the final push of content, and it did it without forcing players to desperately seek out golden exclamation points. By setting aside questing and dailies, and by focusing on players working together in the world – hunting for treasures and fighting powerful monsters for lucrative loot – *World Of Warcraft* felt like it had the potential to feel fresh again.



Draenor runs wild with this, and is suitably full of distractions. The *Timeless Isle* concept has been blown out across all of its zones, ensuring you're never far from something to do. The focused quest lines will keep you on the right path, but it's those who still remember – and desperately miss – the thrill of exploration from the vanilla days that will take the most enjoyment away from this expansion. Bonus quests, rare enemies, hidden hubs and plenty



LOOKING FOR GROUP

One area that still needs improvement is *Warlords Of Draenor*'s dungeons. While we love the inclusion of personal loot – which ensures you're never battling with some asshole with a 'need or greed' agenda, the dungeons are far too easy and devoid of XP rewards to be worth your time. That said, they are big on spectacle, so are worth playing through at least once. At the time of writing, *Warlords*' first raid wasn't live, but we imagine this is where *Warcraft*'s true challenge and majesty will present itself. Players who fear *World Of Warcraft* has become too casual over the last five years will still harbour these concerns in *Draenor*. We just hope Blizzard has learned its lessons after *Mists Of Pandaria*'s divisive dungeon and raid content.

FAQs

Q. WILL IT CONSUME MY LIFE?
Of course it will, this is *World Of Warcraft* we are talking about here. The questing is stronger than it's ever been.

Q. SHOULD I BOOST STRAIGHT TO 90?
While it's worth reading up on your chosen character class beforehand, boosting to 90 won't impede you in any significant way.

Q. HOW ARE THE SERVERS?
The servers work perfectly now after the launch-night fiasco, where Blizzard was rocked by a DDoS attack.



Left: Dungeons are easier than ever, which is a shame. Looking For Dungeons continues to have a negative impact on this once-loved component of *WOW*, though once players gear high enough for Heroics they will hopefully come into their own.

Above: Blizzard has completely redesigned and updated the ageing character models. While they don't look as good as the models in *Arche Age* or *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, it's enough of a novelty to make your character feel fresh again.

more, Blizzard has finally motivated the player to actually adventure through its expansions, instead of racing toward the finish line. The expansion to questing and its pacing mean there's real pleasure to be taken from exploring every inch of the zones.

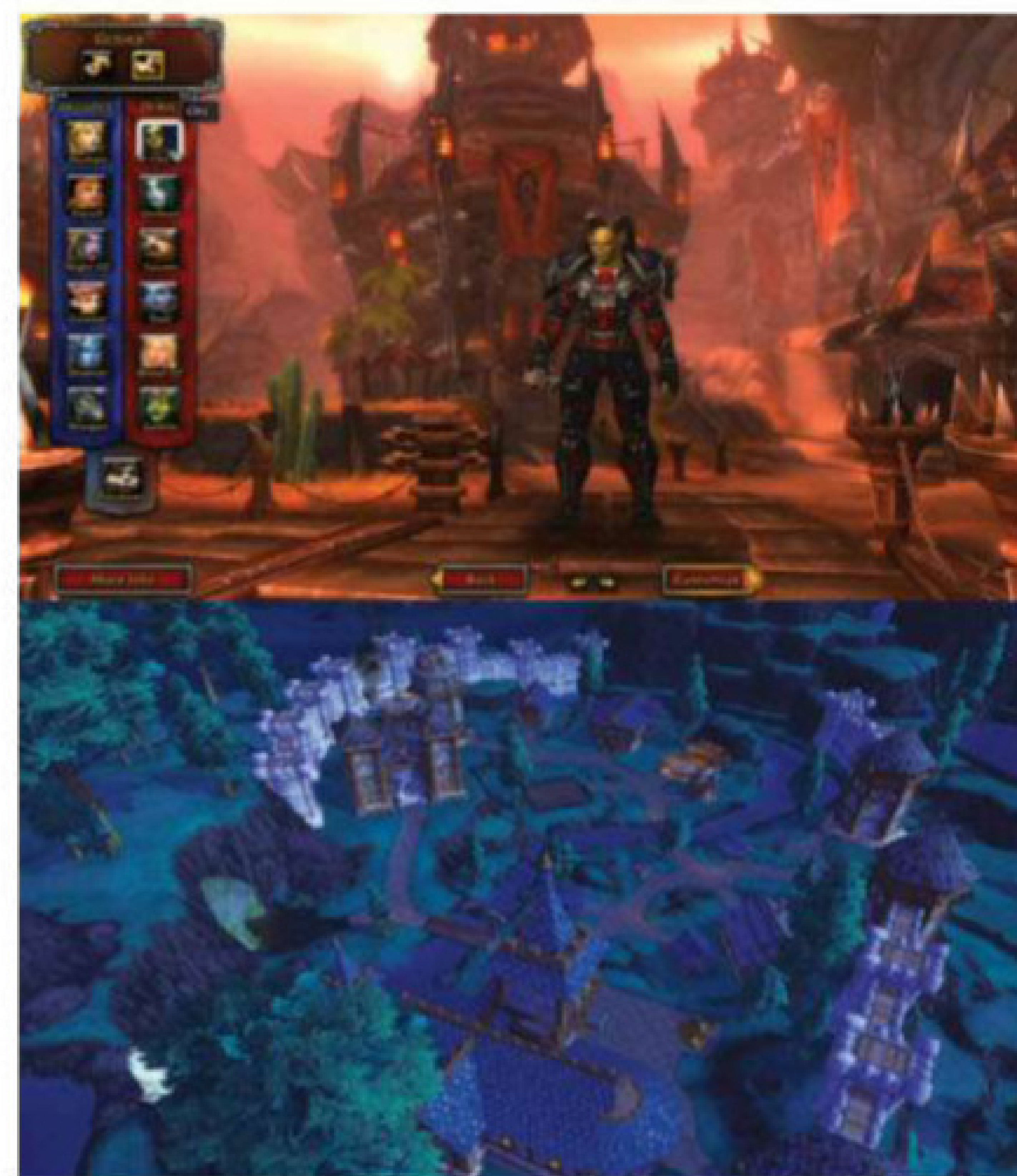
The focus on exploration continues still, with the addition of *Warlords*' other major appeal – Garrisons. This expansion finally promotes you from Azeroth grunt to titan of the universe. You're no longer doing inane footwork for idiot NPCs; now you're given respect for your numerous victories throughout the expansions as you're awarded control of your faction's main Garrison. It acts as the home for the expansion, as well as a functioning base of operations. You'll procure a handful of followers throughout your journey and send them out on specific missions for you – or have them join you in the field as bodyguards. All your hard work questing and exploring will grant you Resources, which can in turn be used to construct useful buildings and Garrison upgrades. These can be tailored to your own character's particular skills and interests – with the Tavern offering daily Dungeon quests, or the Stable, which offers various bonuses to mounts. It's incredibly simple, but immensely effective. You'll be returning to your Garrison well after you've hit level 100 to send your followers out on new missions and upgrading their levels and items.

Warlords is the ultimate celebration of the *Warcraft* franchise's 20-year legacy and *World Of Warcraft*'s seemingly unending potential. Some of its mechanics are starting to creak under a decade-old design, but it shows no signs of withering against the tides of time.

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

GARRISON GOOD TIMES – You can invite friends into your newest addition, the Garrison, which means they quickly build a strong sense of community for Guilds.

VERDICT 9/10
HERE'S TO ANOTHER TEN YEARS, WOW WILL NEVER DIE



Above: Seeing *Draenor* in the past, as the Iron Horde run riot, is fantastic for the long-term, lore-loving player. Get some friends together and go on an adventure to your favourite location – you'll love the redesigns.

RETRO EVOLVED, EVOLVED

Geometry Wars 3: Dimensions

"One more go." That's what goes through your head as you die for the tenth time in a row, but it's more of an instinct than a coherent thought. You don't have time to visualise the words, much less vocalise them, before your reflexes kick in and you jab the restart button. The relentless twin-stick shooting that characterises the *Geometry Wars* series was always capable of inducing this type of primal trance, and that hasn't changed in this latest instalment.

What has changed in *Geometry Wars 3* is the way in which this is achieved. For a start, arenas now come in a variety of shapes and sizes – from flat rectangles to 3D peanut-shaped surfaces. We had feared that these new stage types might detract from the action, but they in fact prove to be a fantastic tool for the designers. It's hard to overstate the impact that the new 3D arenas have – stages without walls mean that you can never be trapped in a corner, while the proportion of the arena that goes unseen creates a new fear all of its own, as previously invisible enemies cross over to the visible surface.

Both these new 3D stages and traditional 2D stages feature in the game's main campaign mode, which is formed of a procession of varied challenges featuring classic *Evolved* stages, as well as returning game modes such as Deadline, King and Pacifism. Each stage has three goals – an easy one-star goal, a moderately tough two-star goal and a decidedly difficult three-star goal. Stars are required to unlock boss battles, in which the goals are calculated to reward risk-takers – simply blasting away and surviving might be good for one star or even two, but obtaining three will require you to deliberately stretch the time limits and focus on attacking enemies to build a higher score multiplier.

Not all of the new additions have worked out for the best. The *Geometry Wars* series has always provided a focused, arcade-style alternative to bloated modern game design, and loadout options feel like a rather unwelcome slice of modernity. You can choose between various types of drone, companion ships which perform specialised functions such as extra fire and collection of geoms, and offer secondary special abilities. These never feel tremendously significant, but irritatingly aren't indicated on high score tables, meaning you'll never know quite how your friends set their scores.

Ultimately, this minor misstep doesn't matter much – they won't be playing on your mind when you hit the restart button once more. You'll be completely lost in focus as you attempt to get that elusive third star, and that's exactly the kind of compulsive experience we want from *Geometry Wars*.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PS3, PS4, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sierra Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Lucid Games
PRICE: £13.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

SIXTY SECOND SHOOTER PRIME



AS GOOD AS

RESOGUN

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CAMPAIGN STRATEGY: The linear progression in campaign is acceptable, but offering choice is better. If you're struggling with a challenge, having no alternative makes the game easier to switch off.

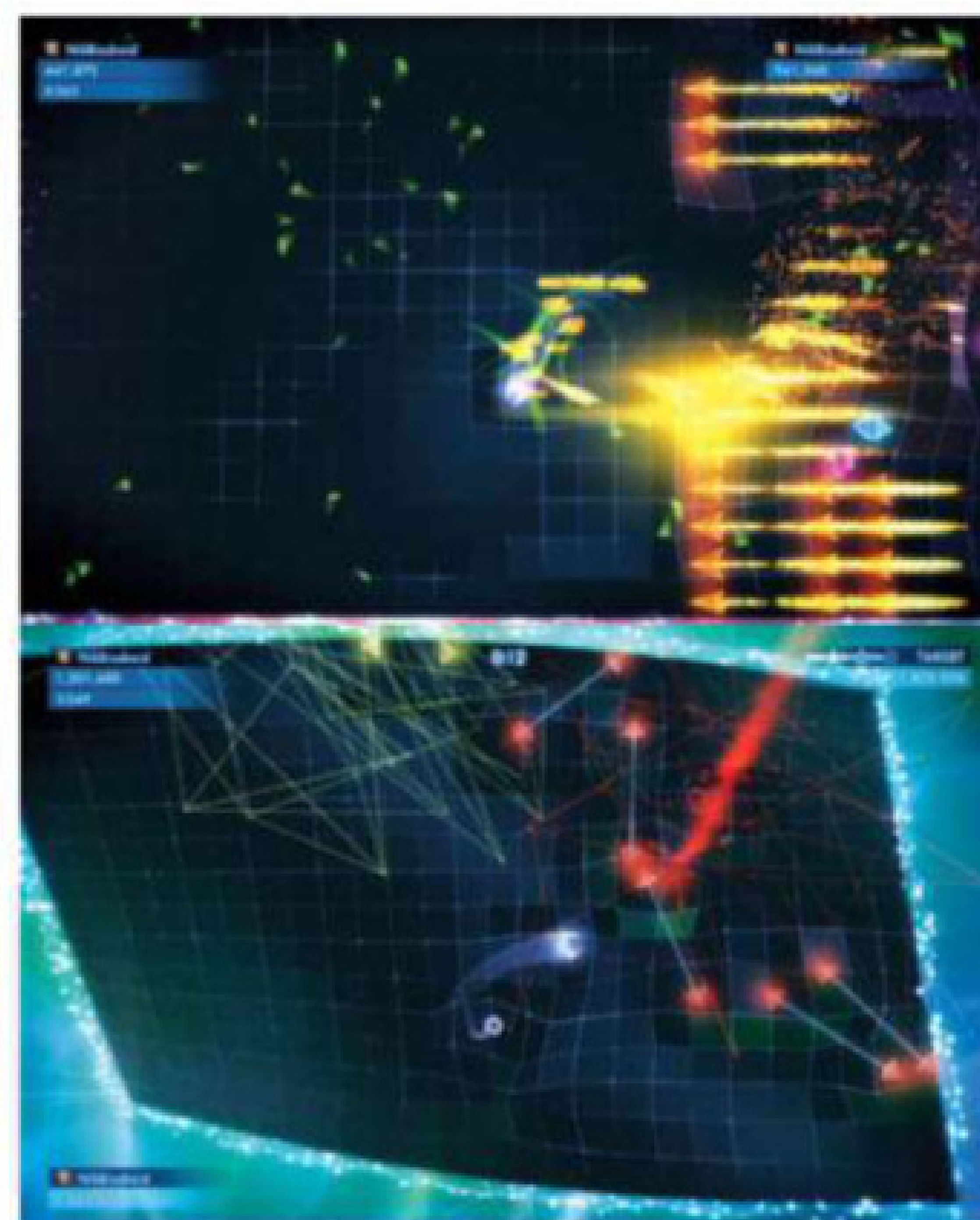


Below: While the play area was always slightly bigger than the screen before, the new 3D stages obscure a lot of the action at all times, though visual cues alert you of new spawns.

VERDICT 8/10
JUST ONE MORE, HONEST



Above: Boss battles are tense affairs, in that you must balance shooting down minor enemies with keeping track of the boss, which acts as a spawn point. They're pretty draining encounters, but they appear infrequently enough that they remain welcome.



WEIGHTY, BUT WANTING

Never Alone

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: E-Line Media
DEVELOPER: Upper One Games
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2



Iñupiaq culture isn't often observed in wider media, and as far as we're aware it's never been touched in videogames before *Never Alone*. The game is a *Limbo*-esque 2D platformer that, on the surface, tells the story of a girl called Nuna and her familiar, an arctic fox that can scramble up walls and jump distances that Nuna can't.

The core of the game consists of a set of brain-teasing platform challenges that can sometimes be so tricky they border on frustrating. That's to the game's advantage, though – level design operates on the same 'less is more' mentality of its genre peers, and to great effect.

Where the gameplay falls down is in the handling: playing alone was never meant to be the idea of this game (it's meant to foster relationships between generations through co-op; a novel and well-realised idea). So if you do intend to go solo with it, you'll find yourself short-changed of the full experience: switching between Nuna and her fox is frustrating and the clumsy collision detection doesn't help. Unity is a solid engine, and it's a shame that a lacklustre platforming mechanic undercuts the gorgeous visuals that make up *Never Alone* – we've never seen the relentlessly white snowscapes of the Northern Circle look so nice, and the spiritual cameos and background detail compounds that wonderfully.

If you're playing through *Never Alone* for the 'experience' it offers you, though, you'll be amazed. Not only does it repurpose ancient Iñupiaq folklore into a proper games narrative that's well-paced and emotionally relevant, the game is also a fantastic exercise in cross-media: the documentary segments that are unlocked by collecting owls offer a kind of incentive that other games don't: the objectives you achieve in game are explained to you in real terms, with real people talking about them.

It's a unique premise that really outlines what E-Line Media and Upper One Games want to do with their new 'world cultures' initiative – tell stories about niche cultures without patronising the player or relying on cliché. The documentary sections flesh out what's otherwise a scant two-hour playthrough with well-shot and evocative cinematography that's actually more worth revisiting than the gameplay itself.

For the price point at which *Never Alone* is currently offered, we can't argue it's amazing value for money. However, we do believe it's a *new* experience in gaming, and a stellar proof of concept for what the developer/publisher combo wants to do. If you're after a biographical and socially relevant gaming experience, invest in *Never Alone* and you won't regret it.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FOR FOLK'S SAKE: The Iñupiaq themes aren't particularly subtle in the game, but the dedication and loyalty with which Upper One Games commits to the style is inspirational



Above: The style of the game is based on traditional Iñupiaq art – bone etchings and ink work all come from centuries of the culture's rich history





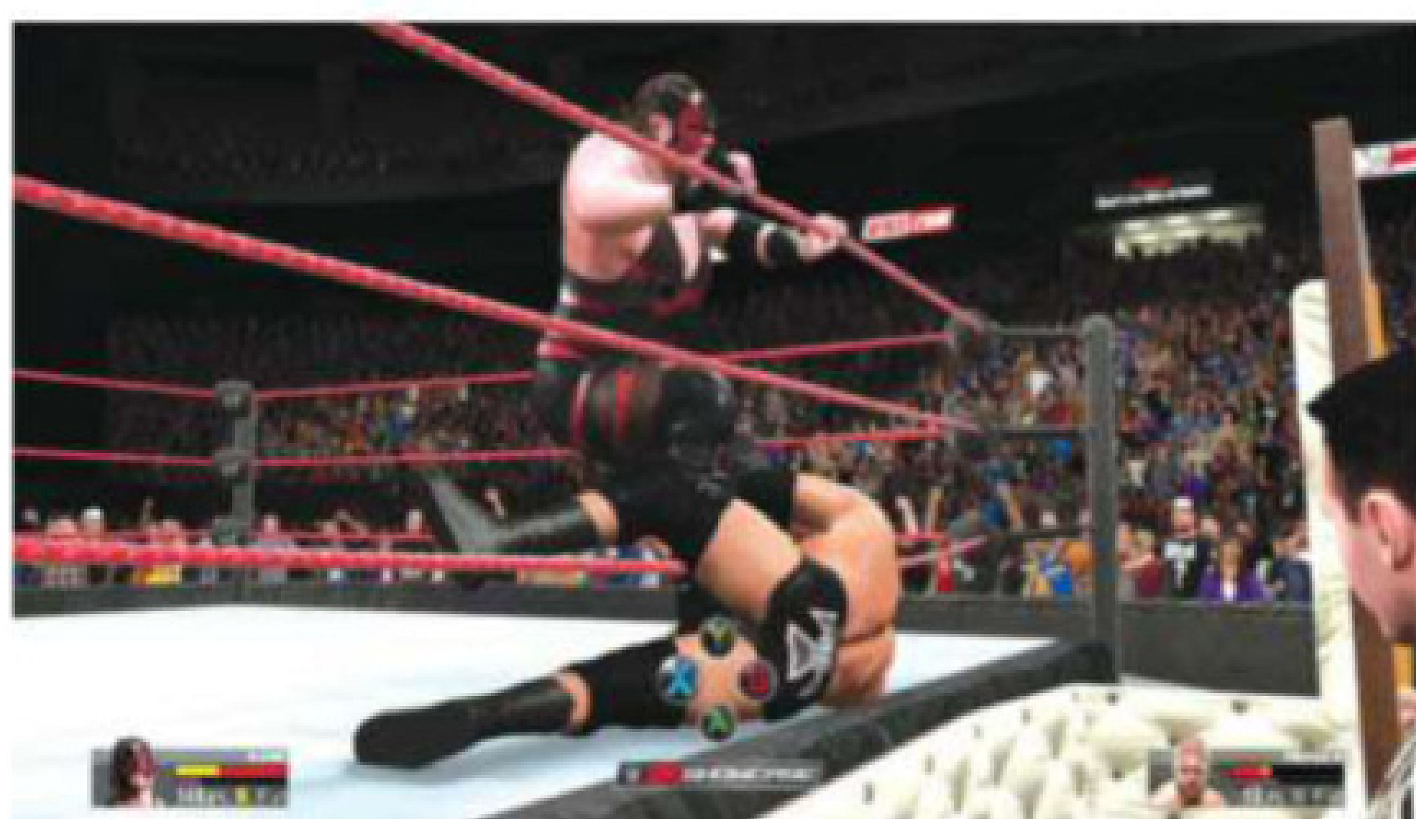
Above: The spirits you encounter are helpful and friendly presences (eventually), each with their own unique story and place in the world's arc

VERDICT 7/10

PLAY IT FOR THE DOCUMENTARY, AND PLAY IT IN CO-OP

SHOCKMASTER: THE VIDEOGAME

WWE 2K15





Above: Close-up shots regularly accompany powerful grapples and ground moves, and do well to convey the drama of professional wrestling by making the moves look painful. However, they also have an unwelcome tendency to highlight the game's graphical deficiencies.

We had hoped *WWE 2K15* would be the game to renew the series. Unfortunately, despite a new developer on board and new platforms to target, it's rather more like an ageing performer has just pulled on a new mask. Underneath, it's just the same.

The game feels heavily outdated in many respects. The visuals are poor – while the facial scanning has created some very convincing replicas (John Cena's model is particularly good), environments are subpar and hair looks uniformly wrong. Old gameplay frustrations return, such as the inability to attack a player stepping through the ropes and attacks that miss due to being slightly out of position. There are bugs, too – we've seen Booker T teleport from one side of the Elimination Chamber to the other, and physics issues make for some very bizarre moments, such as a table being collapsed and flung from the ring by a referee counting a pin. Even the roster feels noticeably dated – departed stars like Alberto Del Rio feel decidedly out of place, as does Rusev's appearance as a NXT wrestler.

More intentionally retro is this year's effort to court nostalgic players, the 2K Showcase mode. This offers the chance to relive two famous rivalries, Triple H vs Shawn Michaels and John Cena vs CM Punk, and contains video footage and a variety of classic matches to recreate. However, the detail actually extends beyond the classic matches to rather less memorable televised encounters from Monday Night Raw, and it's hard not to feel it would have been preferable to have more rivalries in less detail.

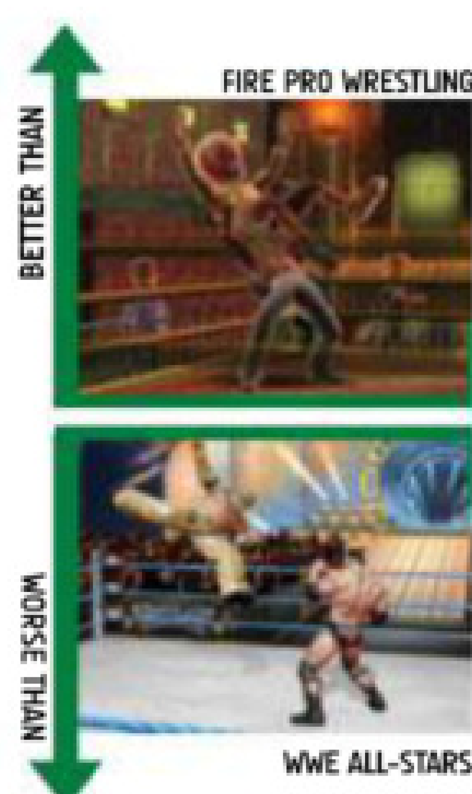
The other new mode is My Career, which offers the opportunity to create a wrestler and take on a full career, from an initial tryout to the main event of Wrestlemania, via the NXT developmental division. Unfortunately, this also has some flaws; progress feels rather slow, a matter not helped by the overwhelming dominance of standard single matches you'll participate in. Creation options also feel somewhat limited, particularly as you can't create a female wrestler.

Despite its many flaws, *WWE 2K15* isn't wholly without merit. The new chain-wrestling sections mirror the televised product well as players jockey for position and trade wrist locks early in the match. Additionally, there's still some fun to be found in multiplayer, particularly when four or more players are involved in a match. Still, with so many problems, we'd advise even die-hard fans to pass on *WWE 2K15*.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PS3, PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K Sports
DEVELOPER: Yuke's / Visual Concepts
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: FIRE PRO WRESTLING



WORSE THAN: WWE ALL-STARS

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

RETCONS: If re-recorded commentary for matches can use anachronisms, let's forget Katie Vick too.
HARDCORE LEGEND: Some wrestlers specialise in gimmick matches. Why not let My Career reflect that?

VERDICT 4/10
SEND IT BACK TO NXT

Below: For all of the game's faults, it effectively recreates the look of WWE's televised events, and features authentic sets and graphics for both current and historical shows. Ring entrances generally hit the mark too, though there are some notable exceptions.







Left: Playing on Amateur modes means you're always aware of where the cue ball and target ball are going to roll, making things remarkably easy. Sometimes it's possible to clear the entire table before your opponent has even had a chance to chalk his cue.

ANY GOOD? FIND OUT AFTER THE BREAK...

Pure Pool

No matter how well made a pool game might be, it's difficult to ever classify one as anything more than entirely functional. The game's core concept of knocking balls against one another and into pockets is so simple that there's barely any space whatsoever for the designers of a game such as this to show their creativity and/or ability. If a pool game works, it works. And that's about it.

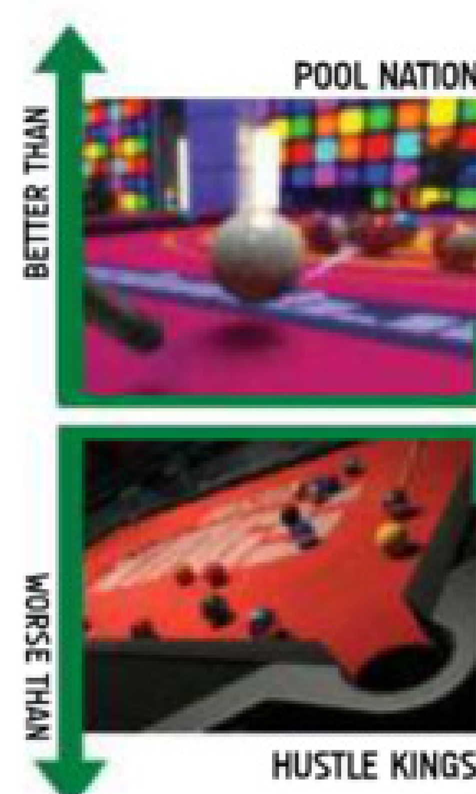
Pure Pool does work. It works just fine. Visually it's lovely, every perfectly rounded surface and achingly smooth stretch of felt doing much to liven up the appeal of a sport that is typically rooted in a complete lack of sexiness. The elevator music soundtrack fits this highly glossed aesthetic, designed to make you feel as though you're hitting the table in some late-Eighties jazz bar in a faux-trendy area of Chicago or New York.

There is some complexity to pool, of course, all of those angles and velocities. Such a physics system is, like near-everything else here, well executed. Not once did our shots result in unexpected events; everything was smooth, pleasant and predictable.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 4, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Ripstone
DEVELOPER: VooFoo Studios
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: 14 November 2014
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: YES

BETTER THAN — POOL NATION



WORSE THAN — HUSTLE KINGS

How hard you want to make things comes down to personal preference. The Amateur difficulty displays a line showing where both the cue ball and the ball you're going to hit will travel, while Pro shows only the route of the cue ball. Master shows no lines at all, and that's when things become extremely difficult.

No matter how many camera options a pool game might offer, you simply cannot get as varied and in-depth a look at the table as you can in reality – making playing without at least some of the lines visible an exercise in frustration. That key angle that you want to view a pocket or ball from just isn't available and, as such, it's common to feel as though you don't have all the relevant information required to make the perfect shot. This is particularly annoying when up against some of the fiendishly skilled AI opponents, none of which seem to share this same problem.

Playing multiplayer – either online or local – is where most of the fun is to be found. After all, snookering your opponent or seeing them miss a simple, match-winning shot is far more satisfying when you can taunt them afterward. Offline, a basic career mode pits you against increasingly skilled cueists in a series of game types, from eight and nine-ball pool to side events that task you with challenges such as potting as many balls as possible, either within a set time or without missing a shot.

There's nothing to get overly excited about here, but this game is a decent digital recreation of the ever-popular hobby. It's not nearly as entertaining as the real thing, but *Pure Pool* doesn't make any mistakes so significant that pool fans should completely overlook it. Play it with a friend for a few hours and then forget about it; it's so simple to learn that you'll have mastered in that time anyway.

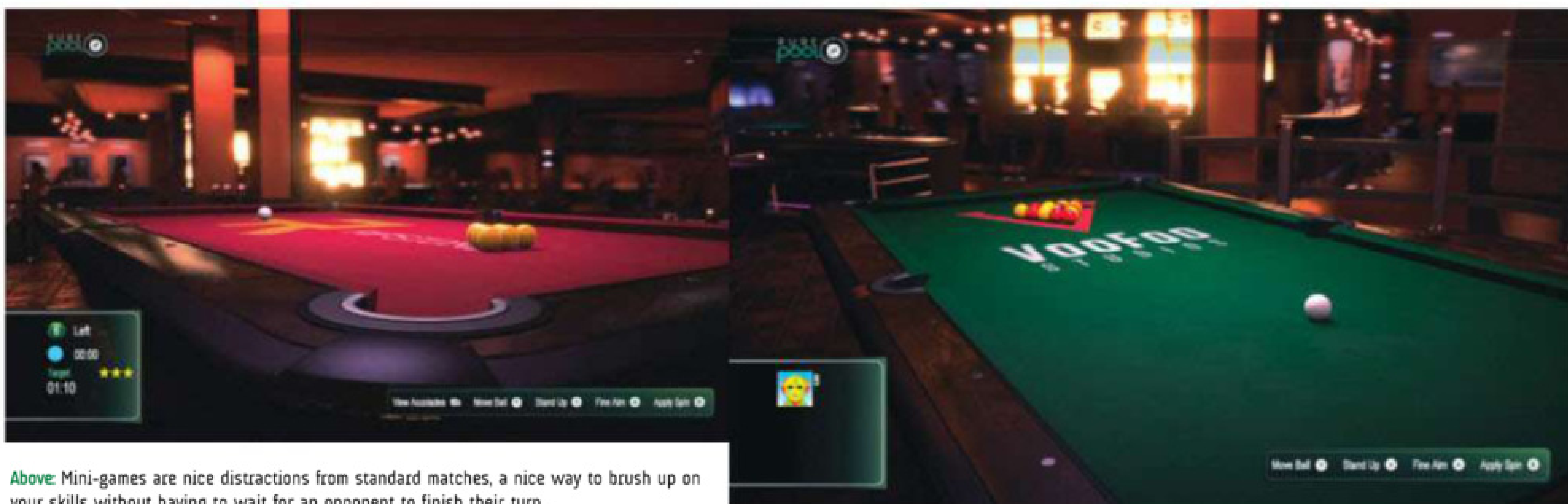
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CUE CRAZY: Pinball games overcome many of their basic gameplay limitations by including table designs that are over-the-top and often spectacular. Why can't a pool game do the same thing?

VERDICT 6/10

IT'S A POOL GAME. A PURE POOL GAME. IT WORKS.



Above: Mini-games are nice distractions from standard matches, a nice way to brush up on your skills without having to wait for an opponent to finish their turn.

Below: Your sun-drenched isle becomes more developed and industrialised as the campaign progresses, although haphazard city planning early on can leave you with an urban-development nightmare later in the game.





DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Bulgaria
PUBLISHER: Kalypso Media
DEVELOPER: Haemimont
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-4 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



WE'RE HAVANA GOOD TIME

Tropico 5

***Tropico 5* wears the colours of its heritage with pride.** A satisfying management sim that refuses to take itself too seriously, it charges you with transforming an idyllic island hideaway into a major global player. Through a series of distinct eras, each with its own challenges and rewards, the crackpot El Presidente presides over resource gathering, deal brokering and the steady march toward modernisation. The question is not whether you'll succumb to corruption, but rather just how conniving you will become.

It's this sense of moderation and balance on which the whole premise pivots. Growing in power and stature has its benefits, but sees expectations rise accordingly. Soon royalists and revolutionaries are clashing, communists and capitalists are at loggerheads and you're dealing with environmentalists over the wealthy industrialists' demands for progress at any cost.

As the number of concurrent tasks increases and the demands become ever-more polarising, you have the option of attempting to try to please everyone. Adopting policies and undergoing construction projects that appeal to each faction will earn a modicum of grudging respect from each. However, it's just as valid to pay for troublesome ringleaders to be discredited, banished or even assassinated and so earn the adoration of the opposing party; you just need to ensure that you have a sufficiently loyal army to put down the ensuing civil unrest.

Violence is necessary but not always welcome, if only because *Tropico*'s combat is one of its weakest links. Units take a haphazard approach in skirmishes and often it's simply a question of who has the largest force of the strongest units. If that's not you then swift production of overwhelming numbers is your only hope.

Tropico's campaign narrative is as offbeat as its larger-than-life caricatures, but it can also feel restrictive. Requests and demands come in regularly and while you're theoretically free to decide how best to meet them, your advisors frequently task you with completing specific projects that lead you to question who's really in charge.

Freedom comes from sandbox mode or in online multiplayer, where a bespoke set of victory conditions encourages you to try to outwit your fellow players or to work co-operatively toward a common goal. You may find yourself scooting closer to the TV to discern the finer points of micromanagement. Navigating menus is fiddly and the combination of triggers and button presses required to manage your islands can be daunting to new players.

Nonetheless, there's something infectious about *Tropico 5*'s breezy attitude to tyranny and dictatorship. A management sim at heart, its tongue-in-cheek humour and catchy calypso beat prevent the city-building and politicking from ever becoming a bore.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

POLITICAL PARODY: Many games put you in charge but few offer a sideways look at the corruption that comes with it. The humour is occasionally puerile but also hits some comedic highs.





VERDICT 7/10
A WORTHY SUCCESSOR TO A CRACKPOT DYNASTY



Inset: *Persona Q*'s battles can be incredibly difficult, requiring a lot of micro-management. The depth is admirable, but you inevitably spend a lot of time meticulously organising items and characters.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Persona Q: Shadow Of The Labyrinth

Its colourful exterior suggests accessibility, but *Persona Q* is a difficult game to get in to. The turn-based combat encounters are hard, and require that you scrupulously manage each of your characters' abilities. Likewise, the story is winding, convoluted, vague – it's told via endless dialogue pop-ups.

You choose to play as either the characters from *Persona 3* or the characters from *Persona 4*, then traverse a series of increasingly challenging dungeons – or 'labyrinths', as the game calls them – in a bid to uncover the mystery behind Yasogami, a high school that is under attack from some kind of magic force. To succeed at the random battles in the labyrinths, you must comb myriad equipment and menu screens, selecting your characters' armour, weapons, move-sets and Personas – special creatures which can be used in combat, similar to *Final Fantasy*'s Summons.

It's typical RPG fare, made frustrating by the 3DS's fussy touchscreen and the infinitesimal amount of detail *Persona Q* demands. It's never a case of just heading into a labyrinth. You have to go to the in-game shop, sell some items, create some weapons, then buy back those weapons before equipping them to your party. You don't just unlock a Persona – you have to attach it to a specific character, then decide what moves it should have. You don't just explore a dungeon and learn the layout as you go – you have to stop and draw a map.

Undoubtedly, some players will appreciate that kind of depth, and it's hardly unprecedented for the *Persona* series. But like Catherine, also developed by Atlus, *Persona Q*'s indurated mechanics consistently get in the way of the story.

It's heavy on exposition and, despite many strained efforts, light on humour, but the narrative of Persona Q at least exists. Every character is a wacky, depthless stereotype, but their voices are at least consistent – characterisation is never sacrificed for narrative convenience. Similarly, the gags are all laboured and post-modern, inspired by the Scott Pilgrim comedy doctrine, which states that the wittiest thing characters can do is point out how absurd their situation is and how ca-razy their friends are. But although it's not subtle, and certainly not funny, at least Persona Q is trying to make you smile. In a world of cynical indie games and pretentious mainstream shooters, that kind of levity is appreciable.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nippon Ichi Software
DEVELOPER: Atlus
PRICE: £34.99/¥4,500
RELEASE: 28 NOVEMBER (JAPAN: 5 JUNE)
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

POOR CHAT: *Persona Q* combines hard line RPG mechanics with the kind of dialogue and characters you'd expect from a Saturday morning cartoon. It's *Final Fantasy Tactics* meets *Pokémon*.

VERDICT 5/10

WELL-MEANING, BUT STUFFY MECHANICS AND STORY

Below: Like *Just Dance 2015*, *Shape Up* is essentially the party game variant of its chosen genre. *Just Dance* doesn't actually teach you how to dance, just as *Shape Up* doesn't really have any hope of getting you into shape.





TIME TO GET PHYSICAL

Shape Up

Ignore everything Jillian Michaels has ever told you: getting in shape and losing weight is not fun. In fact, it is routinely the complete opposite. Doing it the hard way – hitting the gym and braving the roads – is a challenge most of us would rather avoid. And doing it the 'easy' way often involves maintaining an oppressive diet or, if you're overly dramatic, a tube inserted into your stomach. So it should come as no surprise that we turn to videogames as an alternative. A desperate last resort to get over winter gluttony and back to a fitness level where we can run for the bus without pulling a muscle. At the very least, it's an opportunity to earn a few achievements while trying to fit into last summer's jeans.

Ubisoft's reimagining of the notoriously boring *Your Shape: Fitness Evolved* series manages to put an entertaining spin on rigorous exercise plans and calorie management, even if the results don't necessarily speak for themselves.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: JILLIAN MICHAELS' FITNESS ADVENTURE



WORSE THAN: XBOX FITNESS

Traditional exercise routines are discarded in *Shape Up*, instead the title revels in turning workouts into playtime. If you feel more comfortable bench-pressing elephants, punching ice cubes and performing squats to journey to the Moon from the comfort of your living room – rather than embarrassing yourself by tumbling off a treadmill in public – then *Shape Up* could be what you've been looking for.

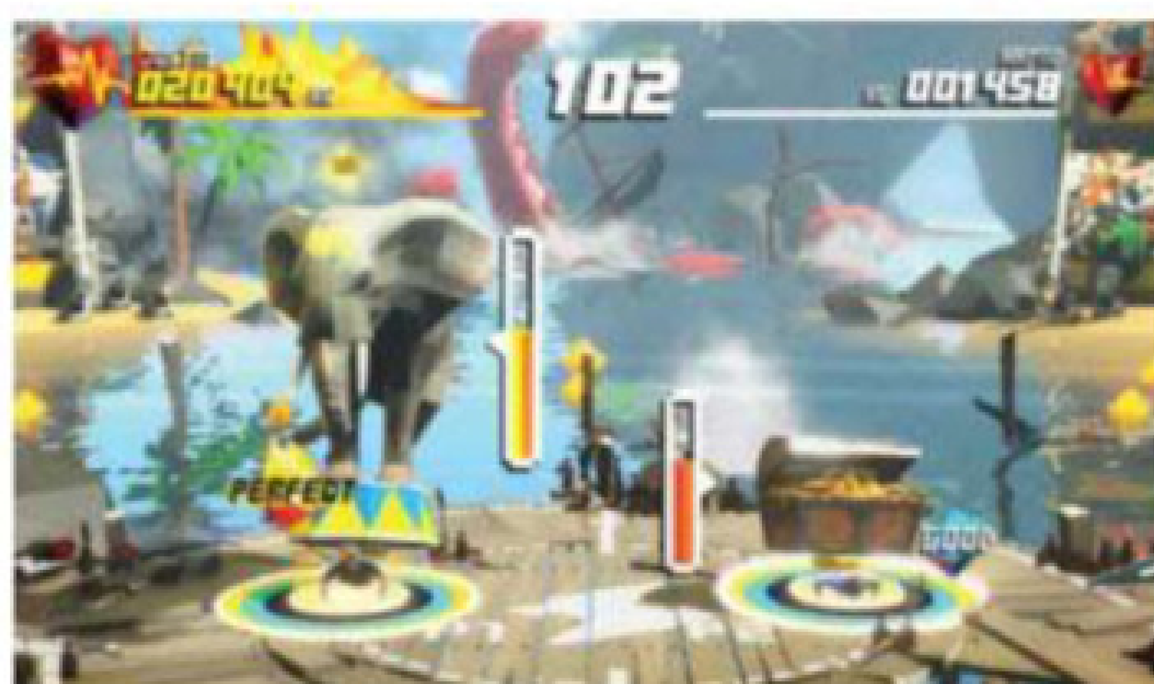
That said, you're still going to break a sweat. In fact, there's a decent chance you might do a lot worse than this game. *Shape Up* is addictive, and does a great job of actively encouraging you to work harder, push yourself and beat your high scores. But of course, fitness is supposed to be hard work, not fun. It's supposed to be done in moderation to be safe and effective, which is tough to do when you're wrapped up in beating ridiculous progression bosses and mini-games. It's a personal trainer's nightmare. Well, it would be if the content didn't dry up insultingly quickly. *Shape Up* disingenuously leaves you to either replay the same workouts ad nauseam, or open your wallet to Ubisoft and purchase either premium DLC or a paid subscription service to keep new content coming in. And that means you're quickly left with only multiplayer to continue your fitness regime.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MOTIVATE YOURSELF: Trying to beat your previous high scores in order to get fit is a surprisingly effective way to motivate you and get you to push yourself harder.

This presents two problems: Kinect needs an absurd amount of floor space and room lighting to register two people, and second, if you feel comfortable exercising with another person, you might just be better off down the gym where you'll never expend the amount of activities you can participate in. Kinect integration is, as expected, still unreliable at the best of times. As is *Shape Up*'s commitment to getting you in shape. Its silly approach to fitness is amusing, but there isn't enough here to hold attention for an extended period of time, let alone train you up for a marathon.





VERDICT 5/10

IT'S CHEESY AND SILLY, BUT IT'S FUN. JUST NOT LASTING FUN

BETTER THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

Shin Megami Tensei IV

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo (EU)
DEVELOPER: Atlus
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: SOUL HACKERS

AS GOOD AS: PERSONA 4 GOLDEN



Why has Atlus turned heel and headed back to the templates MegaTen came from? The previous numbered entry in the Shin Megami Tensei series was a departure for Atlus – Lucifer's Call (Nocturne in the US) was a far cry from the sprite-based dungeon-crawlers that lead to its creation. It was a 3D, cel-shaded beauty – a journey through the various philosophies that play into creating a world running on alignments: chaotic, ordered and neutral, each had their own intimate ideals and consequences to deal with.

Shin Megami Tensei IV is a 3DS exclusive, so it hasn't got a lot of hardware to play with – not really, not when you think it could have released the game on Vita or home console. Thing is, the 3DS release is an informed decision: *Shin Megami Tensei IV* is a love-letter to the original *MegaTen* games, and is so playful and self-aware of its heritage that it'll cause fans of the series to occasionally put their consoles down and nod to themselves, smiling.

To its discredit, *MegaTen IV* takes about six hours to get going but once you penetrate the Earth's crust the game becomes a *MegaTen* release in all its modern gothic, terrestrial horror-inspired glory. Until then, you're gently introduced to the game's myriad RPG tropes: the series' staple demon fusion makes a return (although the interface for it is initially confusing, long-time *MegaTen* fans will come to love the 'Filter' function in the end), in-battle conversation recurs, and a new AI app-based system replaces the Magatama perks of Lucifer's Call.

By running a standard levelling system alongside both fusion and the Burrough's app (think of her as a 'Perk' mechanic, similar to how you level up certain skills in *Fallout 3*), Atlus creates an incredibly in-depth RPG that should result in no two players having a similar run-through.

The game system mimics the narrative: where seemingly small choices in the beginning can have huge repercussions later down the line. It's a self-knowing nod, and is even referenced in the body text by the familiar AI that acts as your exposition-dumper/companion throughout the game.

It wouldn't work on Vita, nor on home console – it'd feel outdated and boring – but Atlus has made sure to validate it for 3DS, taking the best bits of the previous *MegaTen* games and redoing them on Nintendo's nifty handheld. It helps that the 3D is actually quite good, and the OST is what you'd expect from an Atlus game (read: mesmerising and catchy).

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

GOTTA FUSE 'EM ALL: The StreetPass functionality allows you to send demons out into the wild and potentially merge with other players' demons, meaning you can get some *crazy* results back.



Above: While the characters don't have the depth you'll be used to from the *Persona* series, your allies do a admirable job of sticking to their pre-determined alignment without coming across as cliché.





Above: Death isn't permanent in *IV*, you can use in-game cash or your 3DS Play Coins to get the Ferryman to send you back to where you died.

VERDICT 9/10

SPELLBINDING LOVE STORY TO ITS ORIGINS

SURVIVAL FANTASY WITHOUT THE FANTASY

This War Of Mine





Above: When deciding where to scavenge, you'll have to weigh up the benefits of what you can find versus the dangers that might await you. Sometimes, snow or fighting will make half the map inaccessible for a few days.

***This War Of Mine* is deliberately stripped back, a war game without battles, a survival game without zombies.** You control a handful of civilians just trying to stay alive while a fictional but familiar modern conflict destroys the city around them. By day, the group stays in the dilapidated building that's now home. Through a side-on dollhouse view, you direct them to make improvements: a stove, a bed, a radio to provide both news and music to play over the sounds of gunfire. You can't queue actions like in *The Sims*, and directing multiple people at once is difficult, but often there won't be much to do but watch and wait, or fast-forward to night.

At night, you can send one person to scavenge nearby buildings while the others sleep or guard the base. Each building marked on the map has a list of what you can expect to find there, both good and bad. You'll direct your scavenger through another dollhouse, with those rooms out of their eye line blurred out. They can rummage through containers and piles of rubble to fill up their backpack, and whether it counts as looting or stealing depends on who else is there. Some are willing to trade, but others should be avoided. Or killed. It's typical resource management: food, bandages, fuel. The people are also resources, as each has a particular skill, like bartering or crafting from fewer ingredients, so some can feel more valuable than others. A touch of randomness means that the buildings available to scavenge, neighbours who come asking for help, and people who ask to join your group might be different on your next play.

Also important is mood. Help others and your people will be content and make optimistic quips. If someone dies, they'll become depressed and perform actions more slowly. If they reach broken, you won't be able to direct them at all and you'll need to have the others bring them food and try to talk them out of it. Leave them home alone and you may return to find they've killed themselves.

Unfortunately, the writing – from dialogue to diary-style updates to notes discovered while scavenging – is poor, but the game's message comes through well enough in the systems. Knowing that survival is a matter of finding the right formula gives you just enough hope that it's even more crushing when your plan for success slowly crumbles.

The slow pace can make it less tempting to try again right away with a different tactic, but perhaps that's for the best. When on day 30 the radio says that international aid is on its way in a fortnight's time, but your people are starving, sick, and broken, you realise that in some situations two weeks can feel like forever. And real people living through modern conflict don't get to just start over.

FINGERPRINT

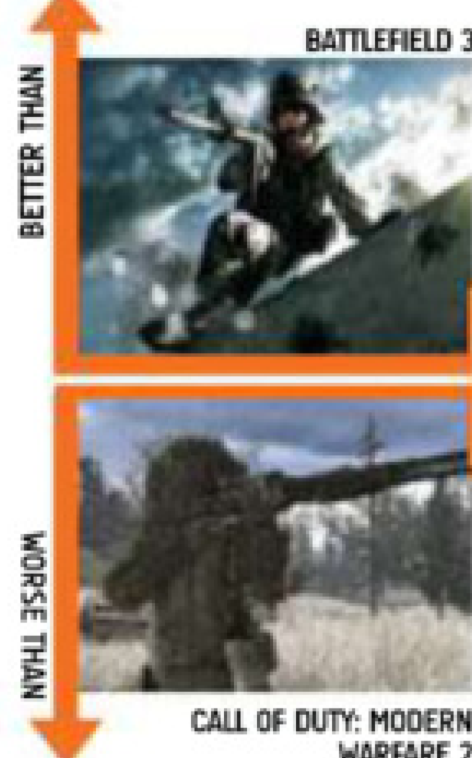
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

COMMON PEOPLE: Rather than glorify soldiers, this game tries to show what war might be like for ordinary people with ordinary wants and needs, from food and warmth to coffee and cigarettes.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: 11 Bit Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: 14/11
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP / Vista, Intel Core 2 Duo 2.4, AMD Athlon X2 2.8 Ghz, 2 GB RAM, Geforce 9600 GS, Radeon HD4000, Shader Model 3.0, 512 MB, DirectXVersion 9.0c

BETTER THAN: BATTLEFIELD 3



WORSE THAN: CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2

VERDICT 8/10

AN EFFECTIVE LESSON ON THE CASUALTIES OF WAR

Below: Each possible member of your group has a different personality, as you'll be able to tell from their updates when major events happen. While some may be happy to help neighbours, others are less likely to see the benefits.







Inset: Visually, this is not terrible considering the age of the hardware *Supercross* is running on. What's undeniable, however, is that things look worse in motion than they do when static – the animations are barely able to keep up with the racing.

WE'RE GETTING PRETTY TYRED OF THIS…

MX vs. ATV: Supercross

This is a series in need of a drastic U-turn. Back in 2009 the MX vs. ATV series hit a bit of a high point with Reflex, an off-road racer that provided genuine excitement and depth without taking itself so seriously you needed an X-Games gold medal to play it. Five years on and, despite staying in the hands of developer Rainbow Studios that progress is nowhere to be seen.

The feature list makes for exciting reading – 17 tracks, 12 players, five series in career mode – but ultimately *Supercross* is an outdated and unwelcome mess. Not only does it feel insultingly rushed and haphazard, but it fails to understand what was in need of fixing.

Both handling and AI, arguably the two most important aspects of any racer worth its clutch, are vacant and infuriating. Clearly the idea for the handling is to hit that 'realistic sensation', an idea based on giving you an idea of what it's like to drive the actual vehicle in question without requiring you to put much effort in. Attempting to hit this middle ground between 'simulation' and 'arcade' almost never works, so it's no surprise to see it fail drastically here.

Different analogue sticks are used to steer and lean your rider. Without a doubt this gives you greater control over your momentum and angle into a corner, but the idea isn't backed up by a physics model capable of processing subtle movements. As a result, many of your actions and intentions feel as though they pass through ignored and unnoticed.

Your AI opponents are blessed with the gift of extra speed whenever they should desire to attain it, seeing you become the victim of overtaking manoeuvres that are simply impossible to take seriously. In truth, Reflex suffered from all the same problems mentioned here – but that was five years ago and, as such, easier to forgive. As time goes on we expect improvements to be made, especially to an existing formula.

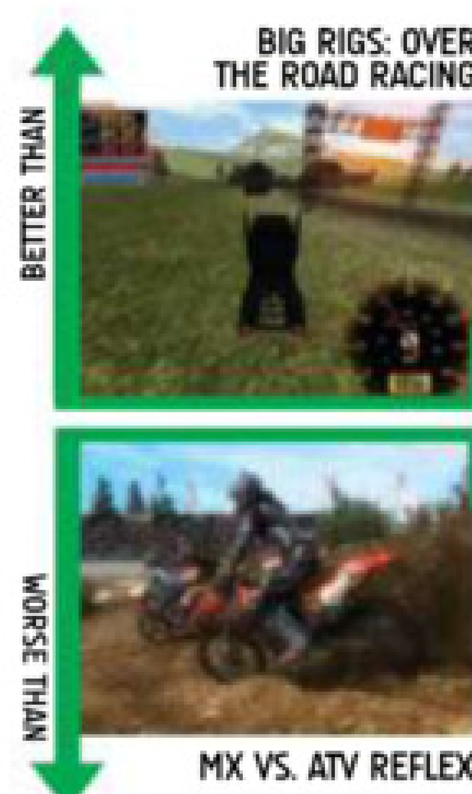
To see the same problems coming back time and again makes it ever more difficult to look beyond them and get excited about the few positives – not least the ability to pre-load jumps and precisely pinpoint the resulting landing. Not fixing the irritating failures of past games, however, is inexcusable at this point and indicates a game produced only to sell a few units in the Christmas rush.

The fact that it is available at a reduced price point will come as some consolation to series fans looking to indulge their nostalgic memories of *Reflex*, but that's slim praise for a game that deserves little in the way of attention. It might be better to speak with your wallet and not indulge in this at all, perhaps that'll force some much needed change.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC, Mac, Linux
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Nordic Games
DEVELOPER: Rainbow Studios
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: BIG RIGS: OVER THE ROAD RACING



WORSE THAN: MX VS. ATV REFLEX

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CATCH A THIEF: Quite simply, the AI cheats. In the likes of *Mario Kart* this is okay because you can laugh it off. Including such extreme rubber-banding in a game that wants to be taken seriously? No.

VERDICT 3/10

OFFERS NO PROGRESSION SINCE 2009'S REFLEX



Left: After a while, a Kraken spawns in the centre of the map. Whichever team can capture it first will have a huge advantage as it storms the enemy's base, causing massive damage.

Right: You'll win the game when you destroy the enemy's giant purple crystal, or Vain. It's defended by turrets, and enemy heroes will spawn just a few feet away. So… hurry up.

CLAIM THE GLORY, AND LOOK GOOD DOING IT

Vainglory

You might not think that MOBAs are 'your thing' and perhaps a mobile one like *Vainglory* won't change your mind. But there's something about this little game that had us starting rounds over and over, continuing to improve on our previous performances.

The title is, at its core, a 3v3 battle arena title, in which you pick a hero, pair up with random strangers online and battle it out for control of a small battlefield. If you've played titles like *Dota 2* or *Smite*, you'll know what to expect – but where *Vainglory* differs is the level design. Unlike *Dota 2*, for example, there is only one 'lane' across the top of the map through which your small teams of minions will run. These weak, swarming minions help keep enemies distracted while you support them with stronger attacks.

The lower portion of the map is jungle, containing neutral enemies that both teams can fight to earn gold, as well as strategic bonuses like Minion Mines and Gold Mines. It's a simplification of traditional MOBA design, but one that benefits playing on small screens. Some of the enemies down south are really tough, but the rewards can be great, so keeping a good balance of 'Jungling' (yes, we know) and all-out attack brings some welcome tactical depth.

The character options are good, but as this is a free-to-play title, there's a catch. There are ten heroes to choose from, each with different strengths and weaknesses, but the availability of them rotates regularly. If you want to unlock a hero permanently, you can buy them with ICE, an in-game currency that can be obtained through an in-app purchase. Thankfully, this is the only in-app purchase you'll find, so aside from unlocking characters, you won't find opponents marauding through the battlefield on the back of an enormous dragon while you throw stones at them.

Perhaps the best and most surprising thing about *Vainglory*, though, is the control scheme. Everything is, of course, touch-based, but the interface has been built around this and the result is a fantastic, smooth experience. Every weapon or ability is within easy reach, and attacking and moving are quick and easy. The shop, which can be accessed in your home base or in a specific location on the battlefield, contains dozens of upgrades so you can focus on specific skills to customise your hero. The ability trees are easy to understand and upgrading is fast, as long as you have enough gold.

While games can last anywhere between 15 and 30 minutes, we often found ourselves jumping straight back into another round instantly. There are some issues, such as the limited choice of heroes and the single map, but for a free title there's plenty of fun to be had here.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Super Evil Megacorp
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: YES



FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

METAL ENGINE: This game is one of the first to take advantage of Apple's new Metal graphics technology for iOS 8, which gives developers access to the 3D tools built in to the hardware.

VERDICT 7/10
TACTICAL TOUCH-SCREEN FUN FOR FREE

Below: Noise plays a big part in how well you can sneak through a level. Make a sound and all guards in its radius will come to investigate, so use this distraction to your advantage.





A SORT OF CLASS ACT

The Marvellous Miss Take

There are things we can appreciate about protagonist Sophia Take's tour of London's private art galleries. The way she glides across the polished wooden floors, slipping through the sight cones of hulk-like security guards and stuffing paintings into her designer handbag, for instance. It's a welcome change from the sneaky-sneaky hunched posture players have become accustomed to using in stealth games.

Sophia is a refined thief and this is a game about keeping things as civil as possible. Distraction and misdirection are your biggest assets. There are also tape recorders, smoke bombs, superglue and – inexplicably – teleporters to help you out. These gadgets accentuate the comical slant present throughout, coupled with a situational jazz soundtrack, but the mood tires after an hour or two.

Still, it's possible to pull off some neat tricks with Sophia's gadgets. You can evade a charging guard by throwing your teleporter behind him, or chuck a smoke bomb between security cameras to reach a tricky piece of loot. It's just a shame you can't choose which gadget you want to use on a mission.

Freshness is injected by companion miscreants Harry (a veteran art thief) and Daisy (a pickpocket). After completing a level with Sophia, players can stage another two heists with these characters. Harry's levels take place at night and are a slower, more thoughtful stealth process as he's unable to run. Daisy is the speed demon of the bunch and her targets are the safes dotted around, which can only be accessed after picking guards' pockets for the keys. It's a clever way to flesh out the game.

That said, passing through the same townhouse three times does render the opulent level design into an iterative mass of plain walls, glistening floors and expensive furniture. This is supposed to be set in London, but there is no London personality save for an uninspiring silhouetted backdrop.

Guards wander around their galleries, free from routine patrols, which can lead to some tense moments – particularly when cameras, hounds and laser-triggered alarms come into play. They also appear to be free of human speech, uttering grunts and moans when alerted to your presence. Later levels require a degree of luck if you're to be successful. An errant guard strolling into a room can kill any chance you might have had at escaping, but that's a heist for you.

Sophia's story, though well-written, is presented without the flair of her art-nabbing qualities. As levels are completed players can click on speech bubbles that help build the characters up a little. It's a valiant if shoehorned attempt to make you care. Some actual voices would have made all the difference. This is a decent stealth game, held back by missed opportunities.

DETAILS

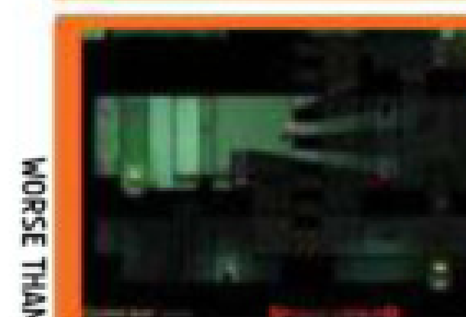
FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Rising Star Games
DEVELOPER: Wonderstruck
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, 3.0GHz Intel Core 2 Duo, 2GB RAM, OpenGL 2.1 (256MB video card or better), 500MB available space.

BETTER THAN

STYX: MASTER OF SHADOWS



WORSE THAN



STEALTH BASTARD/ STEALTH INC. A CLONE IN THE DARK

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CAMERA SHY: A fully rotatable, easier-to-control camera would benefit this game enormously. Having the mouse as both the character controller and camera controller leads to some frustrating moments.





VERDICT 6/10


AN INTERPLAY OF HITS AND MISSES

WHY I ♥...

TOMB RAIDER

STEVE BROWN, LIONHEAD STUDIOS, ASSOCIATE AUDIO DIRECTOR

I'm going to bang on about Tomb Raider *[laughter]. The sound you made when you picked up [key items] was an arpeggio made with a glass instrument – it was a reward sound, and I can still hear it to this day! It wasn't really game-y – there was musical theory behind that. The third note of the arpeggio was elongated, so it sounded like you were reaching higher: it's like octaves in* Mario*, you'll notice every time you get a reward, there's this climbing scale of sound. But yeah,* Tomb Raider *– I think that was the game that first made me realise how* good sound design *could really be in games, how emotionally impactful they can get.*



"I think Tomb Raider was the game that first made me realise how good sound design could really be in games"

STEVE BROWN, LIONHEAD STUDIOS, ASSOCIATE AUDIO DIRECTOR

RETRO

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

TEAM 17

This year, Team 17 will turn 25. To celebrate this momentous anniversary, we've scoured its huge back catalogue to reveal the best and worst of its huge library of games

TEAM 17 WAS originally known as 17-Bit Software and focused on producing and publishing Amiga public domain software. It soon teamed up with a developer group called Team 7, set up base in Wakefield and began to release retail games for Commodore's 16 computer.

The combined team developed a reputation for creating stylistic, technically accomplished games that pushed the boundaries of the C16. While its games sometimes lacked originality, their polish and slick gameplay won the publisher a loyal legion of fans. And while it's most famous for the *Worms* franchise, Team 17 has also found success with *Alien Breed*, *Body Blows* and *Superfrog*. It was one of the first developers to embrace digital publishing and it continues to evolve as the industry matures.

More recently it has begun publishing a large number of third party games, including *The Escapists*, *Penarium*, *LA Cops* and *Light*, essentially mimicking the early days of the publisher, when it concentrated on securing the work of talented Amiga coders. As it turns 25, we feel that this is the perfect time to revisit Team 17's extensive collection of games. How many have you played?



FULL CONTACT 1991

AMIGA

This was Team 17's first published game and it features many of the trademarks that the company's later Amiga releases would become famed for: namely arcade-like gameplay, strong music and bright and colourful visuals. Essentially riffing on the popular 8-bit fighters of the day like *Way Of The Exploding Fist* and *IK+*, it improves things by allowing you to level up between stages. It's not the most original of games, but the gameplay certainly makes up for it.

"TEAM 17 WAS A SAVVY COMPANY AND QUICKLY REALISED THAT ITS MORE POPULAR GAMES COULD BE RETOOLED AS SPECIAL EDITIONS"



ALIEN BREED 1991

AMIGA

Before *Worms* came along this was Team 17's most famous franchise. It's an excellent game that takes the overhead run-and-gun gameplay of *Gauntlet* and injects a healthy amount of James Cameron's *Aliens* into it. The many xenomorphs you battle are extremely similar-looking to H R Giger's famous creation, proving Team 17's adeptness at modelling its games on what was popular at the time, be it a great arcade game or well-known film.

Gameplay is basic, requiring the player to run around the well-designed mazes searching for the exit so they can eventually stop the alien threat, but the action is fast and furious. It's a fun game let down only by its difficulty due to the miserly amounts of ammo that are spread around the base. It was rereleased on iOS in 2012.



CARDIAXX 1991

AMIGA

A game that attempts to combine the gameplay of *Uridium* and *Defender* sounds like an amazing prospect. Unfortunately the reality is completely different. It's easy to fall in love with *Cardiaxx* because it looks absolutely incredible, thanks to its insanely fast, super-smooth scrolling and beautiful-looking sprites. Sadly its bland level design and fiddly controls make it one to miss.

APIDYA 1992

AMIGA

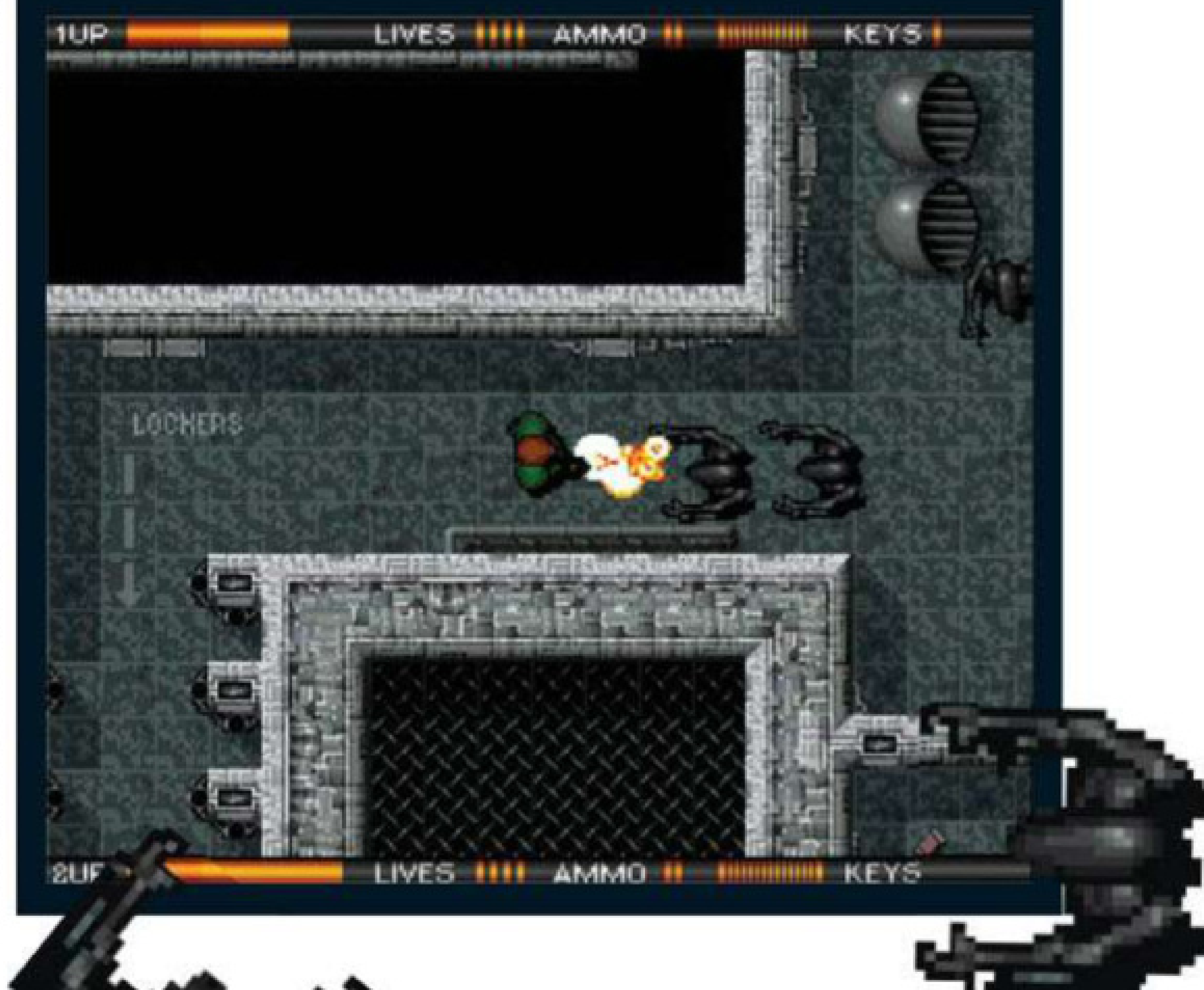
Most Western-created shooters are nowhere near as good as their Japanese counterparts. Fortunately, no one passed this information on to the creators of *Apidya*, who produced one of the best examples of the genre on Commodore's computer, even if it is suspiciously similar to Taito's *Insector X*. Playing as a wasp, the theme of *Apidya* is largely insectoid, with your critter making its way through hordes of creepy crawlies and mammals. The bosses are truly impressive, while the anime-styled cutscenes and exceptionally crafted stages make it stand apart from other shooters.

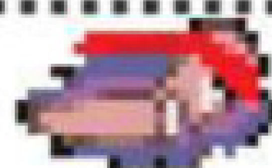


ALIEN BREED: SPECIAL EDITION 92 1992

AMIGA

Team 17 was a savvy company and quickly realised that its more popular games could be retooled as enhanced special editions. *Alien Breed* was the first to receive this treatment and it set a high bar for the games that followed. In addition to adding 6 new stages, a handy password system and a rebalanced difficulty level, it also enabled you to finally shoot through doors (something that became quite annoying in the first version if you ran out of keys). Such was its success that it stayed in the budget charts for over a year.









ASSASSIN 1992

AMIGA

Team 17 was well-known for making games based on popular arcade games of the time and here's another classic example. *Assassin* is essentially *Strider*, but it is *Strider* with its soul ripped out. Aesthetically it's incredible, with stunningly smooth scrolling, excellent animating and lovely-looking stages. Unfortunately the design of these levels is quite bland, with big empty environments. It also fails to capture the sheer strength of Strider Hiryu, who was effectively a one-man army, tearing through the enemy forces. The later special edition improves things somewhat, but it still isn't a patch on Capcom's game.



PROJECT X 1992

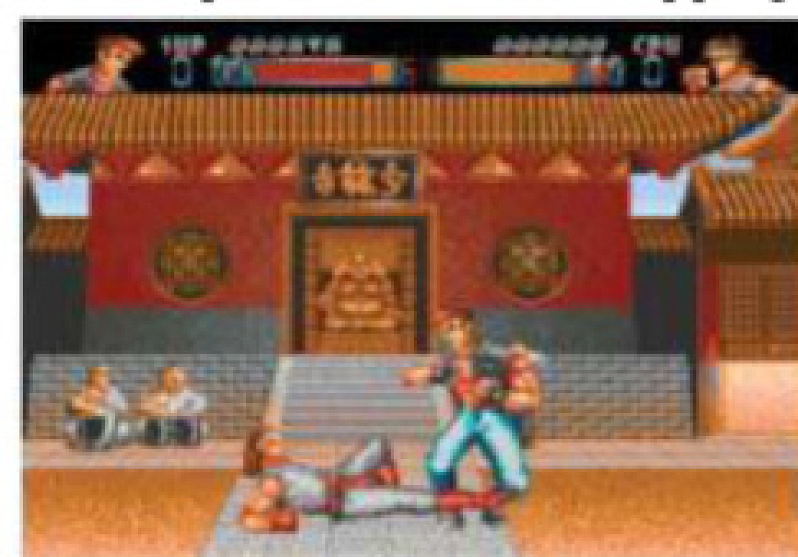
AMIGA

Many Amiga owners proclaim this to be one of the greatest shoot-em-ups around. They're wrong, of course, but it's easy to see why such a claim was made by so many Amiga reviewers at the time. *Project X* does look amazing, with insanely beautiful sprites and an outrageously good soundtrack. Sadly the gameplay is lacking due to a high difficulty level, poorly-placed enemy waves and weedy power-ups. It's certainly not a terrible game, but we're baffled as to why it receives such critical acclaim.

BODY BLOWS 1993

AMIGA

The hysteria around *Body Blows* at the time of release was insane. Touted as a *Street Fighter II* beater, it received amazingly impressive scores from virtually every Amiga magazine of the time. There's no denying that this is better than the Amiga version of Capcom's brawler, but *Body Blows* becomes pretty dull when you strip away its imposing sprites and fantastic music. Animation wasn't the best, while the gameplay is surprisingly sloppy. The variety of characters was decent, but they lacked the character of Ryu and co. An average beat-em-up made worse by excessive disk swapping.





SUPERFROG 1993

AMIGA

Amiga owners will tell you that *Superfrog* is better than *Sonic The Hedgehog*. It's a ludicrous claim to make, but is exactly what you'd expect from gamers who didn't own Sega's console. While *Superfrog* isn't a patch on Sega's classic platformer, it remains a fun little game in its own right and is very entertaining to play. It boasts Sonic's impressive speed, but is let down ever so slightly in the level design department. It's a little harder to react to incoming enemies, while pressing up to jump is never a good idea in precision-based platform games. Still, the animated intro from famed Amiga artist Eric Schwartz remains hilariously funny and we love that you can get powered up by quaffing Lucozade.

"AMIGA OWNERS WILL TELL YOU SUPERFROG IS BETTER THAN SONIC"

BODY BLOWS GALACTIC 1993

AMIGA

Team 17's follow-up to *Body Blows* set the action in space and introduced a selection of wild and wacky-looking opponents. It plays much better than the original game, but still falls short when compared to many fighters that were around at the time. Disk swapping was also improved, allowing you to get to the action far more quickly.



ALIEN BREED II: THE HORROR CONTINUES 1993

AMIGA

Team 17's first true sequel is a solid yet unspectacular follow-up. While the ability to choose between four different characters is a welcome addition, there's little new to the series, other than upgraded weapons and far larger stages. It's a much bigger game than either of the two games that preceded it, but it's let down by a rather punishing difficulty level. If you do play it, seek out the non-AGA version, as it's a little easier.

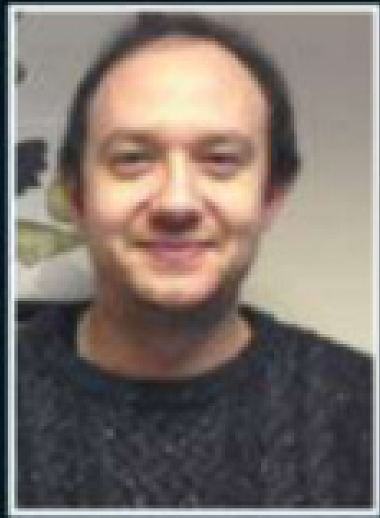


F17: CHALLENGE 1993

AMIGA

Team 17's decent take on *Pole Position* and *Continental Circus*.





INTERVIEW: IN THE CHAIR WITH KEVIN CARTHEW

Team 17's creative manager looks back at the company's history

Why do you think your games became so popular on Amiga?
In the very early days we developed games exclusively for the Amiga. This allowed the coders, artists and musicians to really make the most of the Amiga hardware, and because of that our games had a bit of extra polish and high production values. A lot of the time our games stood alongside the best examples in the genres. For instance, games like *Project X* and *Superfrog* were among the better shooter and platform games out there at the time.

Why did you choose Amiga?
A lot of our early dev team were active in the early Nineties Amiga 'demoscene'; it was their machine of choice when it came to developing software and so it happened mainly as a result of that. Also, the Amiga and Atari ST were the two dominant home computer platforms at the time. Both machines were relatively straightforward to develop for, but the Amiga had the edge when it came to graphics processing power and was the slightly more popular choice among gamers.

Did you realise how successful *Worms* was going to be?
It was the time of the rise of the PlayStation, and technically impressive-looking games with 3D graphics were mainstream. *Worms* was, on the surface of it, a simple game, and the fact it wasn't so visually impressive went against it slightly, but it had buckets of charm and incredible gameplay – and there was a real buzz around the offices that it was a very special game. We were confident it was going to be a success, but nobody could have predicted exactly how successful it would go on to become.

What do you think the secret to Team 17's success has been?
We're extremely lucky to have a really loyal fanbase and community surrounding Team 17. We've always stayed ahead of the curve. After all the company was named after our previous company 17Bit, which was one bit better than the rest! We were one of the first developers to release onto the App Store, XBLA, and we adopted digital distribution very early on. At the end of the day we're gamers too, and we make games we're passionate about and play to death in the offices.

Which early Team 17 game would you bring back, and why?
Well, we have already brought most of them back! It'd probably be Project X; it had really high production values and a cool style and feel to it. Shooters aren't as popular these days, but it'd be interesting to think about what could make that game relevant again to a modern audience. You see a lot of innovation within the shooter genre – it'd be fun to come up with something original to make the game shine again.



QWAK 1993
VARIOUS

What a fantastic little game *Qwak* is. First released on the BBC Micro in 1989, this massively improved Amiga version is the one to play. It's effectively a platformer in the style of *Bubble Bobble*, where you guide a cute little duck around maze-like stages, collecting as much fruit as possible. The Amiga version introduced a second player and increased the levels to 80.

ARCADE POOL 1994
VARIOUS

Although it lacks the impressive visuals of *Archer MacLean's Pool*, this still plays an excellent game of pool. The physics are convincing, there's a large number of play modes to choose from and plenty of customisation options. It's just pool at the end of the day, but it's nice and slick with a great multiplayer mode.



SUPER STARDUST 1994
VARIOUS

Bloodhouse's sequel improved on the original *Stardust* in every possible way. It was graphically astounding, pushing the AGA hardware to its limits, while its into-the-screen tunnel sequences were astonishing to look at and play. Filled with excellent power-ups and boasting a pulsating soundtrack, it remains one of the most enjoyable shooters on the Amiga.



ALIEN BREED 3D 1995
VARIOUS

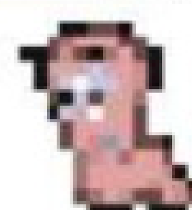
It lacked the fast-paced action of *Doom*, but Team 17's 3D update of its *Alien Breed* series still managed to impress. The playing area was limited to cope with the Amiga's creaking hardware, but gameplay was suitably meaty.

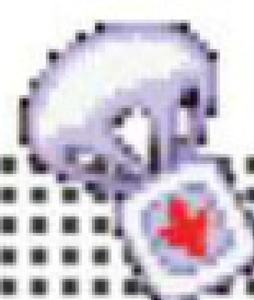


ALIEN BREED: TOWER ASSAULT 1994
VARIOUS

This is quite simply the best *Alien Breed* game in the franchise. In addition to introducing multiple exits to each stage, it's also possible to fire whilst moving backwards; a small but critical addition to the game. Massive in scope (it contains 50 sprawling stages), it's arguably the best-looking game in the series and boasts some nicely powerful weapons.









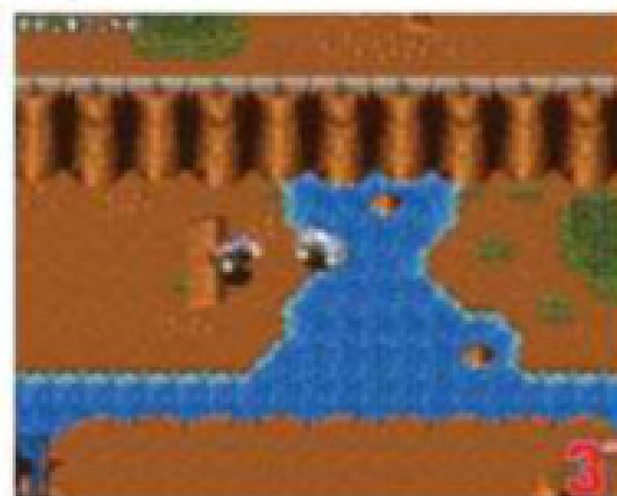
WORMS 1995

VARIOUS

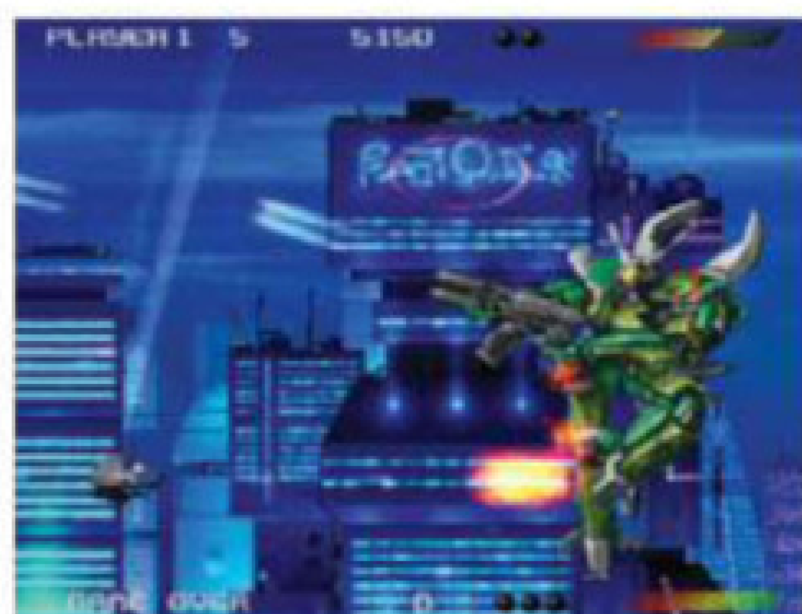
This is Team 17's most famous game and it went on to become one of gaming's most popular franchises. *Worms* originally started off as an entry for a Blitz BASIC competition that was run by *Amiga Format* magazine. While it didn't win, creator Andy Davidson continued honing his game. Although it wasn't that original – artillery games like *Scorched Tanks* being common at the time – Davidson's focus on warring worms and crazy weapons immediately set it apart from its peers. It became a huge success for Team 17 and was converted to a host of platforms, from Sega's Saturn to the Atari Jaguar. It's still one of the finest multiplayer games you can play and has spawned over 20 sequels and spin-offs.

ATR: ALL TERRAIN RACING 1995

VARIOUS



As its name suggests, *ATR*'s big draw is the different environments you race in and how they affect your car. There's a selection of fun power-ups, tracks are well constructed and there are a variety of customisation options on offer. Its difficulty curve is a little steep, but perseverance reaps rewards.



X2 1997

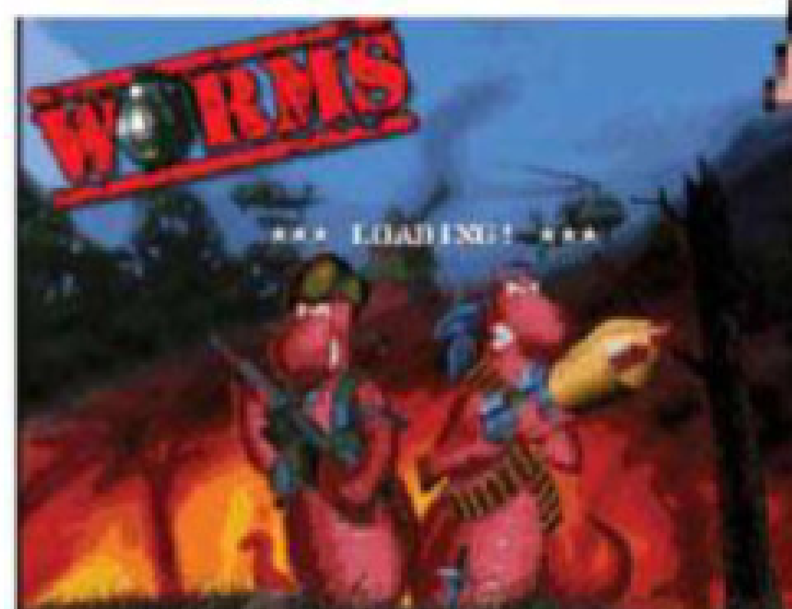
PLAYSTATION

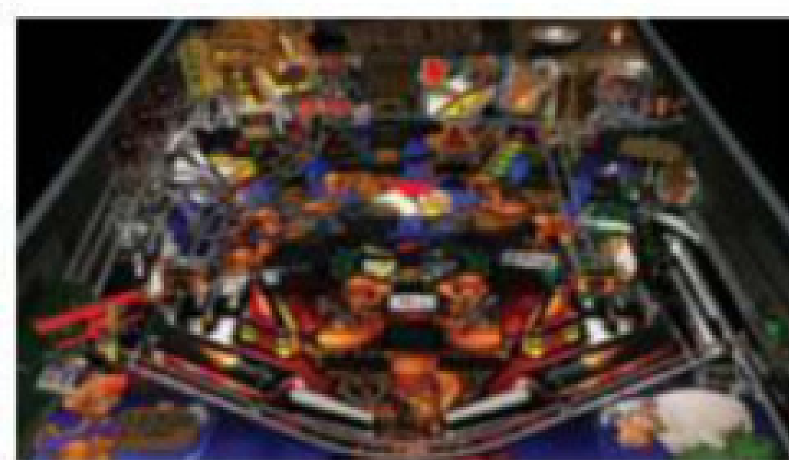
While this sequel is better than *Project X*, it still has many of the issues found in Western shooters. Level design feels haphazard with poorly thought-out enemy waves, while the weapons are weedy and underpowered. There are some nice, chunky bosses, however.

WORMS: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT 1997

AMIGA

Team 17's last Amiga game was an excellent update of *Worms* that offered all sorts of neat new additions, like the concrete donkey and homing pigeons. For many, it is the best game in the series.





ADDICTION PINBALL 1998

PC, PLAYSTATION

This is an enjoyable pinball game featuring tables based on *Worms* and *World Rally Fever*. While both are typical high score chasers, each table is themed around the game it takes inspiration from, so *World Rally Fever* has you competing in various races, while *Worms* has you collecting weapons across five different stages. The later PlayStation release was simply called *Worms Pinball*.



WORMS: ARMAGEDDON 1999

VARIOUS

This is one of the most popular *Worms* games in existence. This is mainly due to the sheer amount of mindboggling options that are available for it, from brand new user-generated game modes to its ridiculous number of weapons. There's even an extensive single-player mode and training missions to ensure there's plenty of replay value outside of the excellent multiplayer mode. It also receives regular updates by two programmers, which means new gamers are still enjoying Team 17's game 15 years on.



WORMS 3D 2003

VARIOUS

The good news is that *Worms 3D* is nowhere near as bad as many think it is. The bad news is that it features a hideously annoying camera that can make even the simplest of tasks a real pain. The single-player is substantial with 35 missions to complete, while the core multiplayer features everything you'd expect from the popular franchise. In fact, the best aspect of the game is that the 3D worms look fantastic.

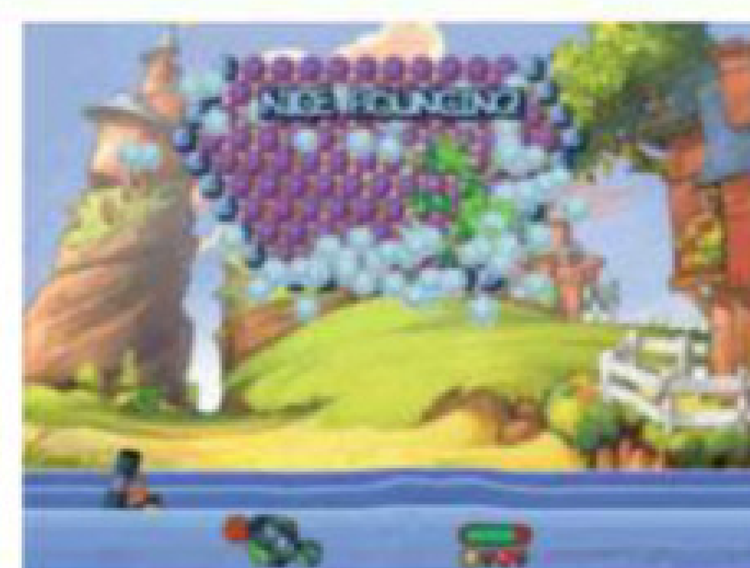




WORMS BLAST 2002

VARIOUS

This fun little puzzler is a water-based version of *Puzzle Bobble*. You're effectively destroying different colour blocks with a variety of popular *Worms* weapons and hoping you can clear each stage before the water rises too high. While the single-player is good fun, the excellent Vs mode is where you'll spend your time.



WORMS 4: MAYHEM 2005

VARIOUS

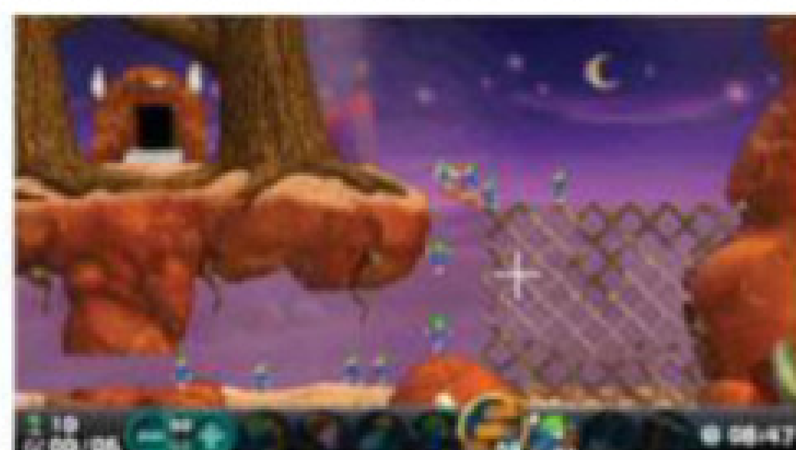
This is widely seen as one of the best early 3D *Worms* games. Like the best *Worms* titles, it features a huge range of customisation, and this time your actual worms can be kitted out in all manner of silly outfits. There's a great new range of weapons that have been introduced as well, and while they lack the lunacy of some of the early *Worms* arsenals, they still work extremely well. It's all finished off with one of the best early campaigns, that even has a significant story mode. The camera is still a royal pain, but it remains entertaining to play. An enhanced, updated version called *Worms: Ultimate Mayhem* was released in 2011 for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3.

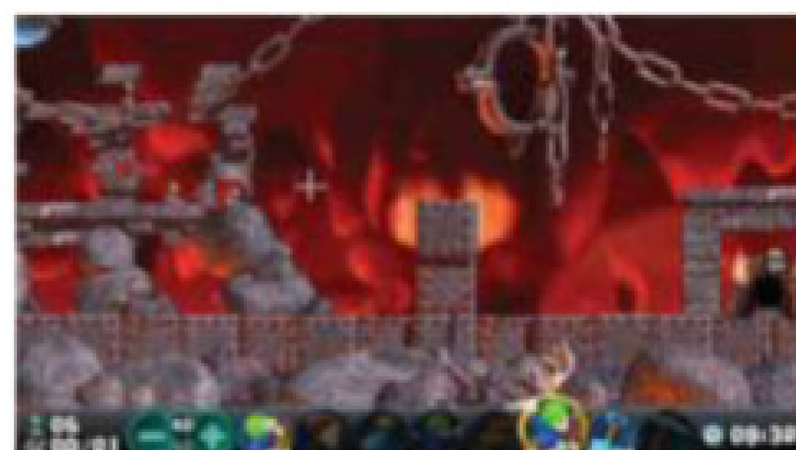


LEMMINGS 2006

PSP

Team 17's take on *Lemmings* for the PSP is absolutely superb. In addition to featuring all 120 levels from the original game, it also adds 36 new ones and a level editor. It features a wonderful soundtrack from Tim Follin, and it was possible to upload your levels to a (then) thriving online community. Bursting with charm and character, it's a fantastic update of the hit puzzle game that's now available for pennies online.





WORMS 2007

VARIOUS

Known as *Worms HD* during development, this game reignited fresh interest in the series. It's effectively an update of *Worms: Open Warfare*, but adds additional content. The visuals are nice and cartoony, there are a tons of hilarious voice samples and the multiplayer caters for up to four teams, though the single-player campaign is admittedly weak.



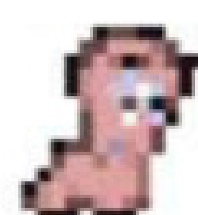


WORMS: OPEN WARFARE 2 2007

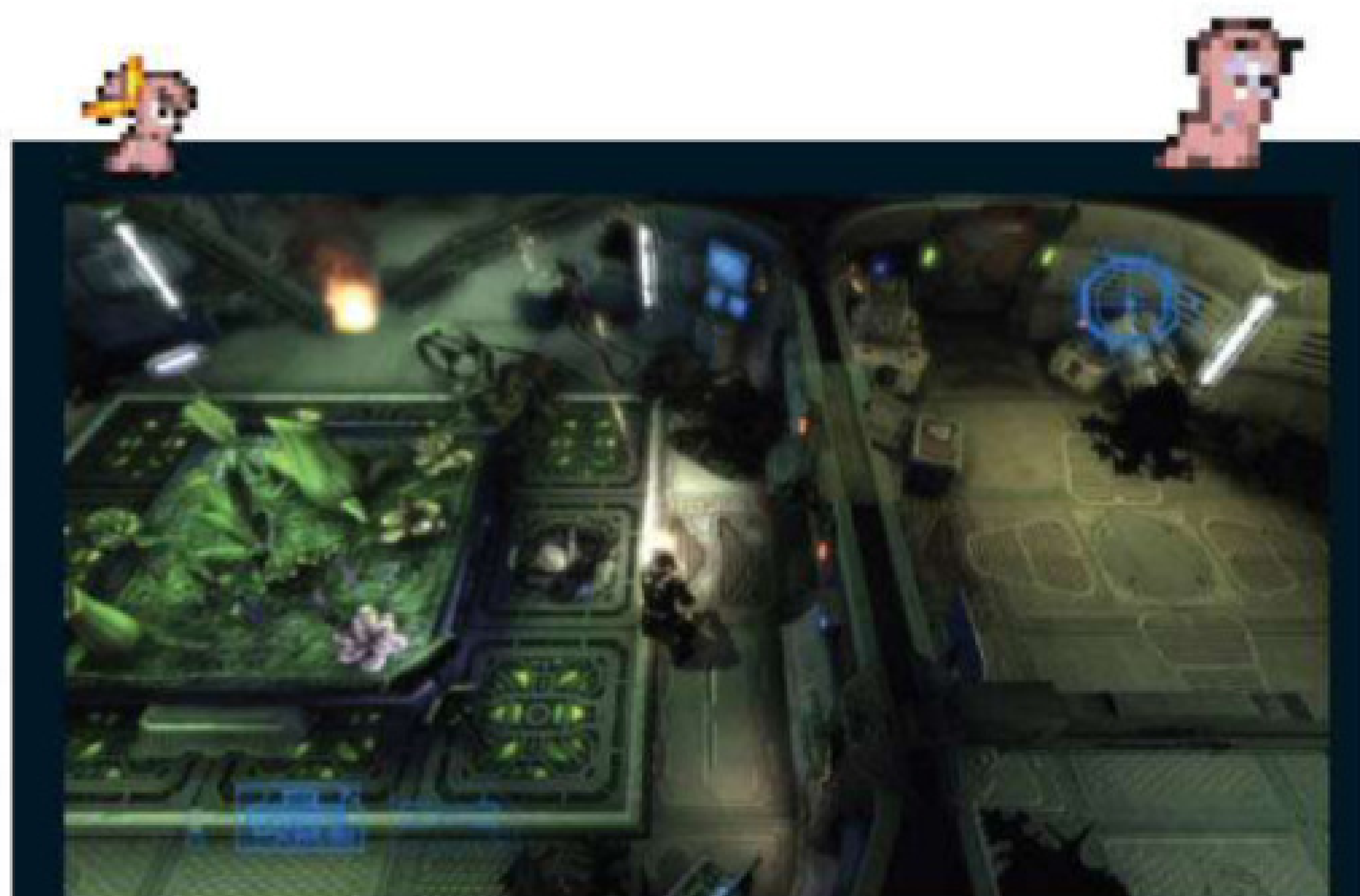
NINTENDO DS, PSP

The original *Open Warfare* was a huge disappointment, so we're skipping straight to the sequel. *Open Warfare 2* is a great portable version of the game, featuring excellent online modes (which have since been shut down) and some excellent single-player modes. Both versions feature Puzzle, Campaign and Training modes, while the DS version has the Laboratory, which utilises four different mini-games built around the machine's unique control systems.





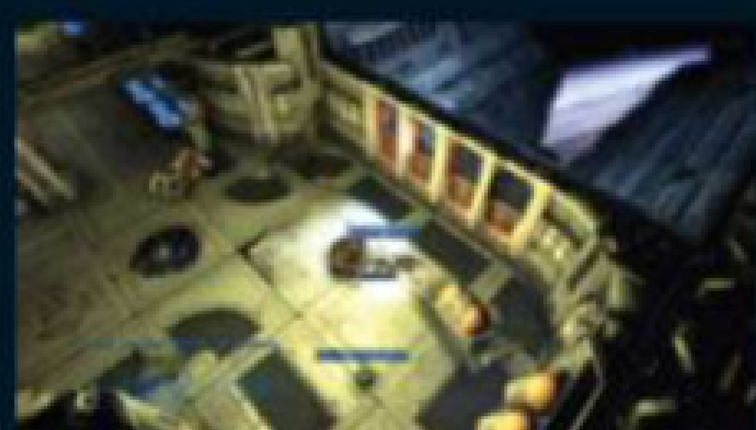


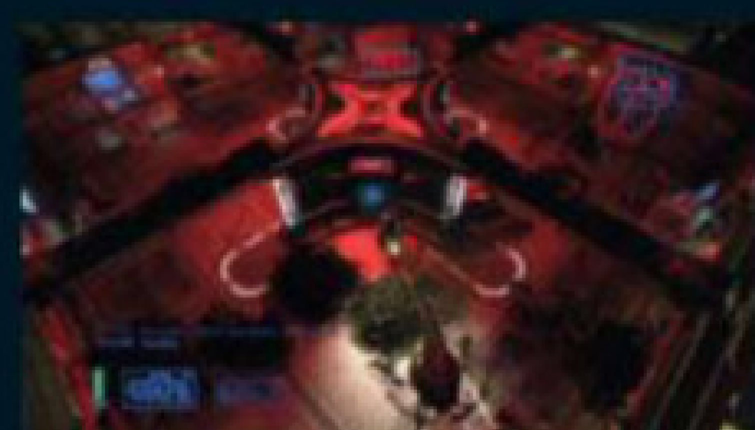


ALIEN BREED: EVOLUTION 2009

VARIOUS

The first new *Alien Breed* game in 13 years was something of a letdown. Graphically, it's extremely faithful to the original games, with moody atmospheric visuals and a dreary, claustrophobic feel. Unfortunately, despite the title, *Alien Breed*'s gameplay didn't really evolve and while the twin-stick controls and ability to loot corpses are welcome additions, the rest of the gameplay gets a little repetitive. A retooled, vastly superior version of the game was released in 2010 for the PS3 and PC in the form of *Alien Breed: Impact*. Play that one instead.





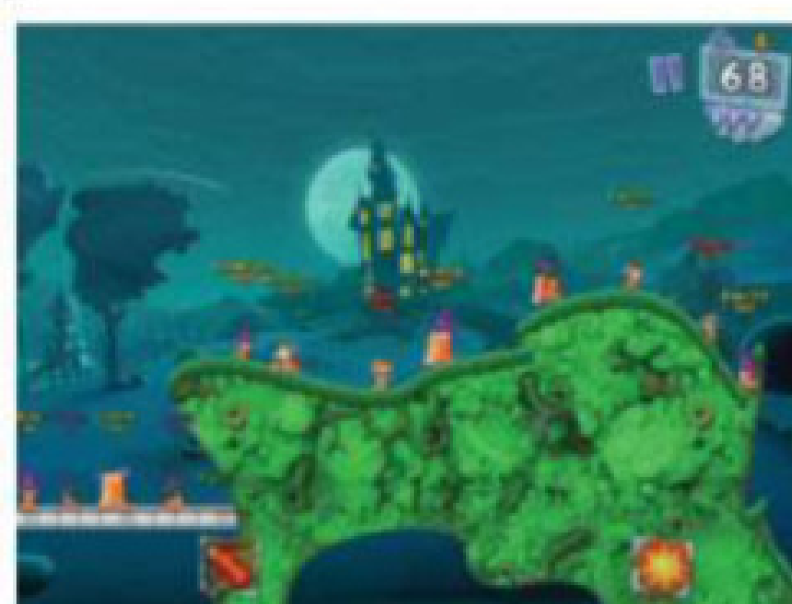




WORMS: RELOADED 2010

VARIOUS

Randomly generated levels, 47 different weapons and a fully customisable landscape editor all add to the appeal of *Reloaded*. It also includes the rather excellent Bodycount mode that pits you against an endless amount of respawning worms. The single-player campaign remains weak compared to the always-entertaining multiplayer options, but this is arguably one of the better versions of the game that you can currently play.



WORMS 3 2010

iOS, MAC

In addition to asynchronous multiplayer and cross-platform play, *Worms 3* introduced new cards which offer bonuses that can be used during play. In short, it's the best mobile version of *Worms*.

WORMS CRAZY GOLF 2011

VARIOUS

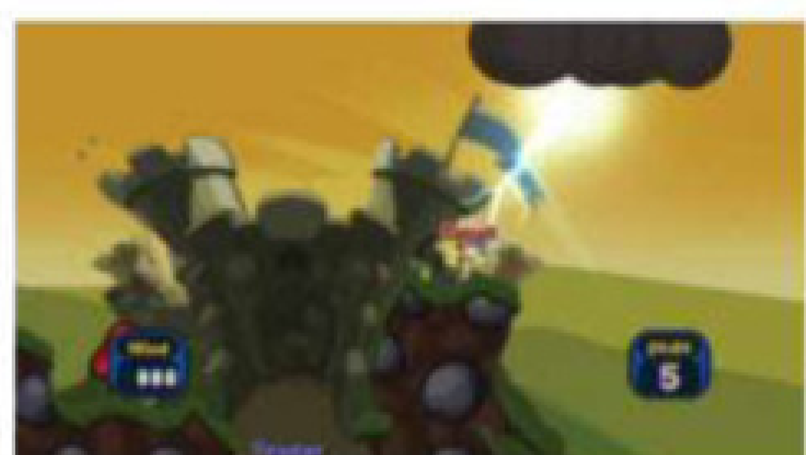
The original *Worms Golf* was released for mobile phones in 2004. This sequel improves things dramatically, but still fails to capture most of the appeal of traditional *Worms* games. In terms of gameplay mechanics, it's largely identical to *Worms*, except you're controlling golf balls. The courses for the most part are well-designed, with three 18-holes to choose from. Interestingly, the iOS version is better than the PC one.



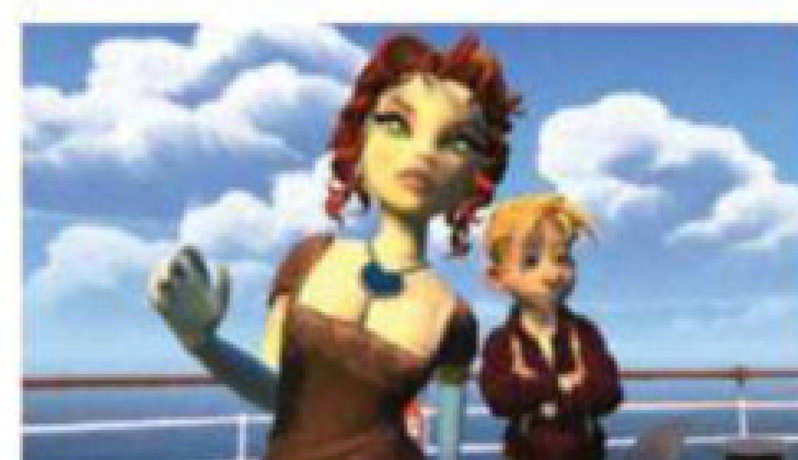
WORMS 2: ARMAGEDDON 2009

VARIOUS

Any game that has a buffalo that runs across the screen and kills everything in its path is a game that immediately interests us. *Worms 2: Armageddon* has this, but also introduces many of the classic weapons missing from the first game, additional gameplay modes – including Forts and Rope Race – as well as an enhanced single-player campaign that mixes standard death matches with the odd puzzle and standalone challenges. The single-player mode also rewards you with coins that can be spent on clothing and tombstones for your warring worms.



"AL LOWE ACTUALLY THANKED VIVENDI GAMES FOR KEEPING HIM AWAY FROM 'THE LAST DISASTER'"



LEISURE SUIT LARRY: BOX OFFICE BUST 2009

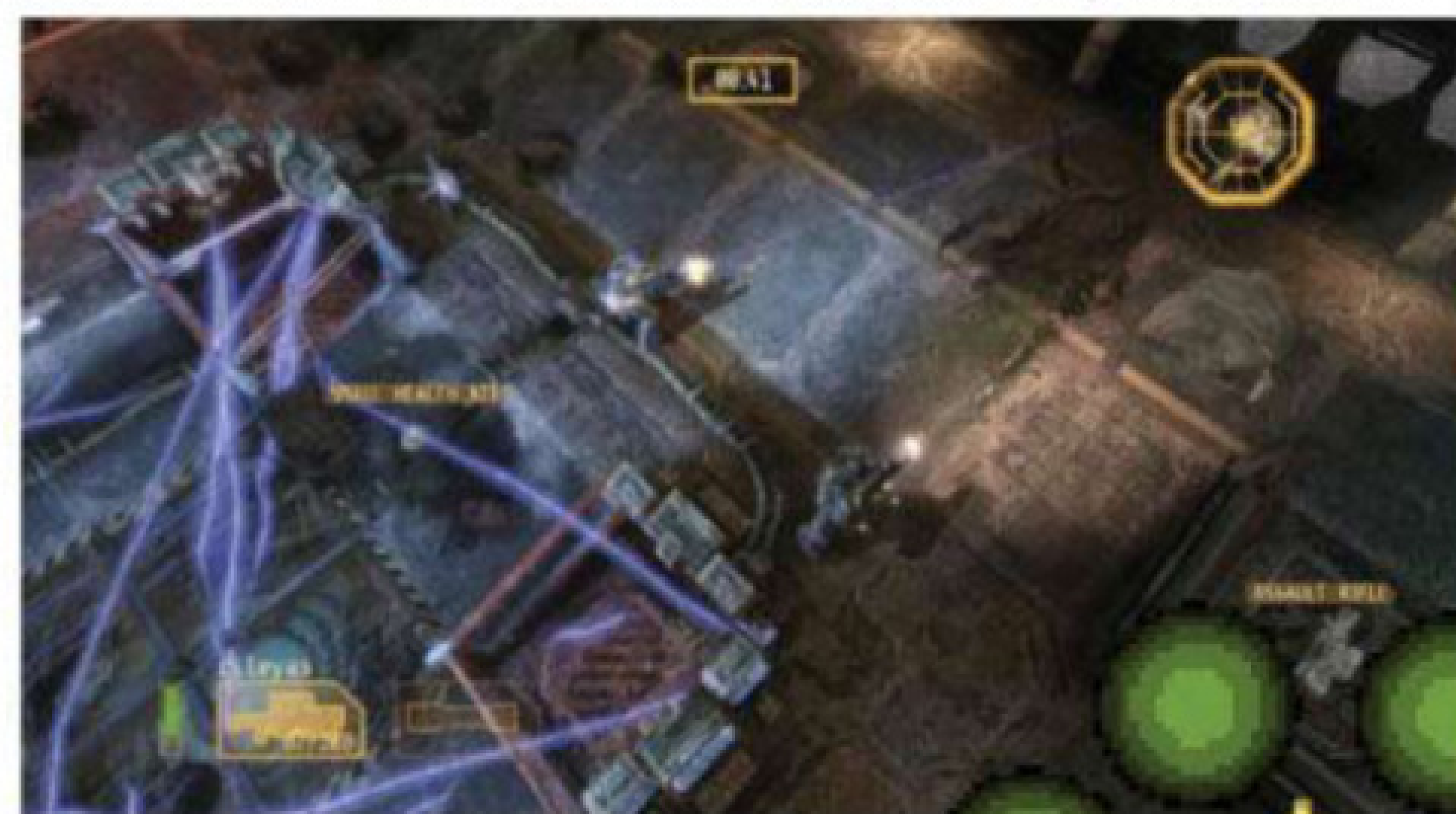
VARIOUS

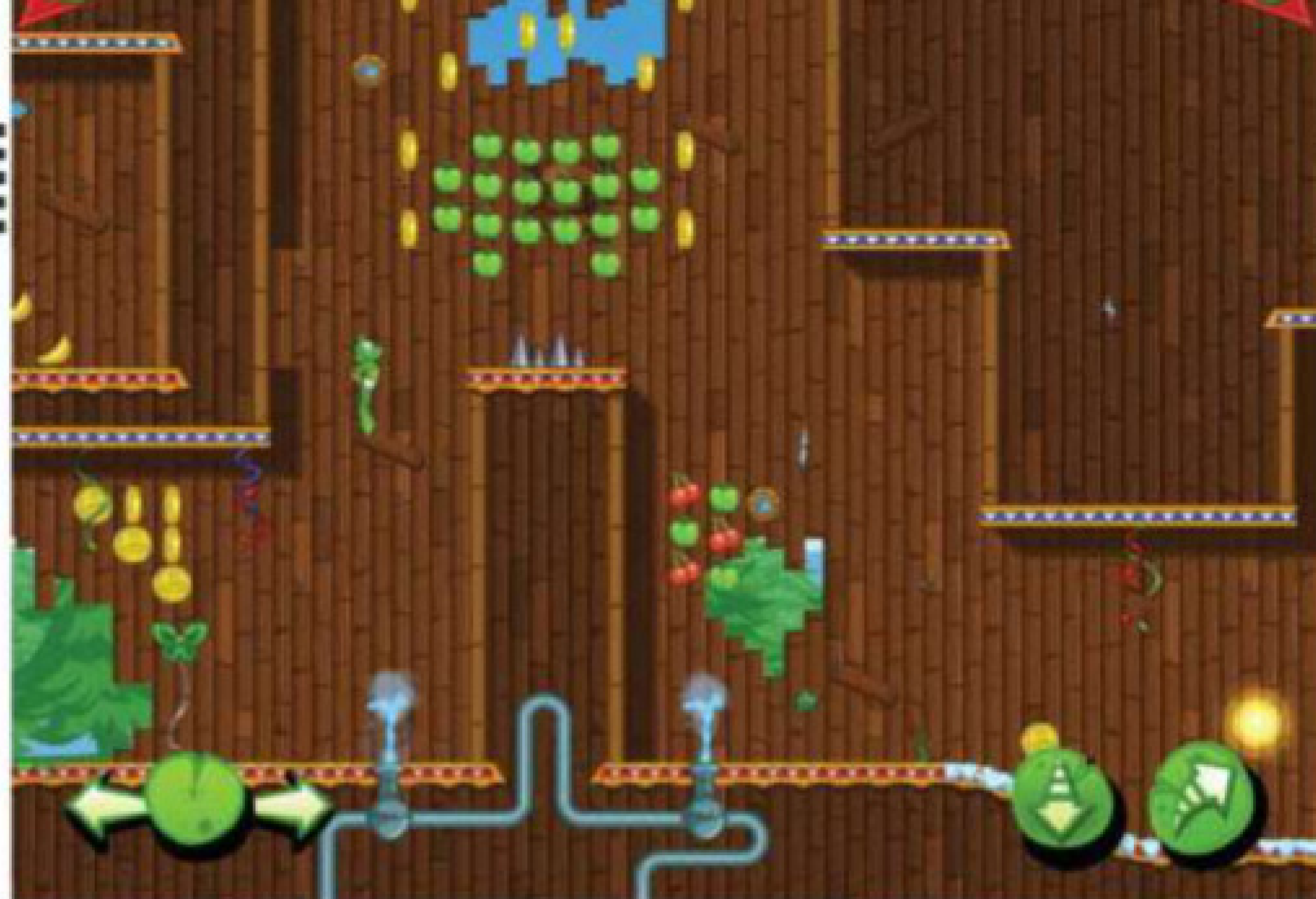
The last *Leisure Suit Larry* game was so bad, its original creator, Al Lowe, actually thanked Vivendi Games for keeping him away from "the last disaster". Everything about *Box Office Bust* is terrible: the smutty script is hackneyed and clichéd, it's marred by technical issues and the platforming and fighting feel really out of place in a *Leisure Suit Larry* game. Some mini-games are mildly amusing, but this is a game best forgotten.

ALIEN BREED 3: DESCENT 2011

VARIOUS

The final part of Team 17's updated trilogy finishes strong, with some great new weapons and far more imaginative level design. The alien design isn't as varied as we'd like and there's still no massive improvement to the gameplay, but the pacing is far better, making for a much tenser experience. It also has a better Survival mode than that seen in *Alien Breed 2: Assault* and better third-person sections.





SUPERFROG HD 2013

VARIOUS

Sadly, this is probably Team 17's weakest update of recent times. There's no denying that there's a certain amount of charm to the cheeky frog, but the platforming feels quite basic compared to many similar games. The Endless Runner option, Frog Trials, is a welcome addition, and it's pleasing to see the original level layouts have been included, but *Superfrog HD* very much feels like a product of its time.



LIGHT 2014

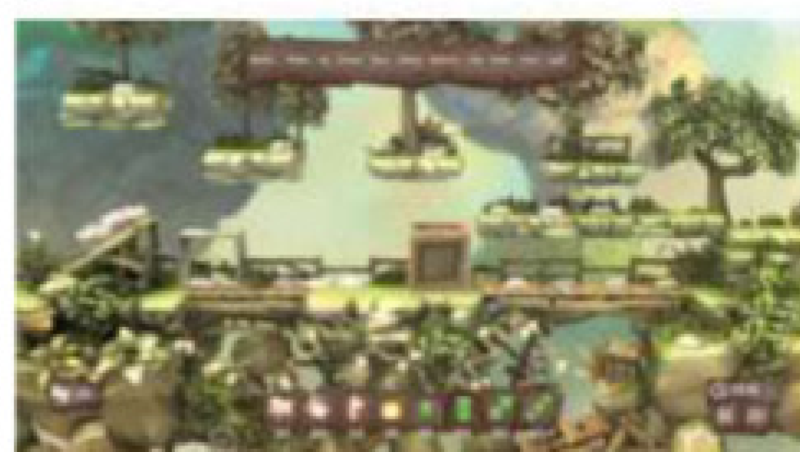
PC, MAC

We love the concept of *Light* but the execution is sadly lacking. It's an interesting take on the stealth genre, with lovely minimalistic neon visuals and a soothing soundtrack. Each stage typically requires you to avoid detection, whilst hacking terminals and retrieving items. Although it's novel, weak AI and lack of content makes it hard to recommend.

FLOCKERS 2014

PC, MAC

Team 17's first new IP in 10 years is, sadly, not very original, taking inspiration from the excellent *Lemmings* and adding little new. In fact, the games are largely similar, the difference being that you're guiding sheep to the exits instead of lemmings, but *Flockers* lacks the clever level design of *Lemmings*. It's a solid puzzler, but adds little to the genre.



WORMS BATTLEGROUNDS 2014

PlayStation 4, Xbox One

The most recent *Worms* game has the biggest arsenal in any game to date – some 65 weapons. Unfortunately, it's let down by numerous little issues that range from clunky controls to some suspect AI in the single-player campaign. It's a pity that the AI is so annoying, as the 25 available missions and additional Time Attack modes certainly add value. The multiplayer is as strong as ever, but it's frustrating that next to nothing has been done to harness the power of the PS4 and Xbox One.









AND THE REST...

Your chronological guide to the rest of Team 17's output

- OVERDRIVE (1993) AMIGA
- APACHE (1993) AMIGA
- SILVERBALL (1993) PC
- PROJECT X: SPECIAL EDITION 93 (1993) AMIGA
- ASSASSIN: SPECIAL EDITION (1994) AMIGA
- ULTIMATE BODY BLOWS (1994) CD32, PC
- ARCADE SNOOKER (1995) AMIGA
- KINGPIN: ARCADE SPORTS BOWLING (1995) VARIOUS
- ALIEN BREED 3D II: THE KILLING GROUNDS (1996) AMIGA 1200, AMIGA 4000
- THE SPERIS LEGACY (1996) AMIGA
- WORLD RALLY FEVER (1996) PC
- WORMS 2 (1997) PC
- NIGHTLONG: UNION CITY CONSPIRACY (1998) VARIOUS
- ARCADE POOL 2 (1999) PC
- PHOENIX (1999) PC
- PINBALL MADNESS 2 (1999) VARIOUS
- ONLINE WORMS (2001) PC
- STUNT GP (2001) VARIOUS
- WORMS WORLD PARTY (2001) VARIOUS
- WORMS FORTS: UNDER SIEGE (2004) VARIOUS
- WORMS GOLF (2004) MOBILE
- ARMY MEN: MAJOR MALFUNCTION (2006) PS2, XBOX
- WORMS: OPEN WARFARE (2006) NINTENDO DS, PSP
- WORMS: A SPACE ODDITY (2008) WII, MOBILE
- ALIEN BREED 2: ASSAULT (2010) VARIOUS
- ALIEN BREED: IMPACT (2010) VARIOUS
- WORMS: BATTLE ISLANDS (2010) PSP, WII
- WORMS: ULTIMATE MAYHEM (2011) VARIOUS
- WORMS: REVOLUTION (2012) VARIOUS
- WORMS FOR FACEBOOK (2013) PC, MAC
- WORMS: CLAN WARS (2013) PC, MAC
- SCHRODINGER'S CAT AND THE RAIDERS OF THE LOST QUARK (2014) PC



Released: 2000
Format: PlayStation
Publisher: Eidos Interactive
Developer: Kronos Digital Entertainment
Key Staff: John Zuur Platten (writer and director), Michael Fernie (lead programmer), Pakin Liptawat (art director), Stanley Liu (original idea, story, effects supervisor), John Paik (character design), Christian Dailey, Adam Maxwell (design), Sandy Abe (executive producer), Tom Marx (producer at Eidos)

BEHIND THE SCENES

FEAR EFFECT

Formed by Stan Liu in 1992, Kronos Digital Entertainment initially specialised in animation before creating its most successful series at the end of the century. It's time to feel the fear factor again as **games™** dives into the devilish world of Fear Effect...



■ Lead programmer Michael Fernie.

IN THE MID-NINETIES, after working in visual effects and CG for a short period, Kronos Digital Entertainment began dabbling in games development with a series of fighting games, starting with the PlayStation and Saturn title *Criticom* in 1995. *Cardinal Syn*, *Dark Rift* and *Eternal Champions: Challenge From The Dark Side* followed, and while they were all perfectly functional and attractive efforts, there was little innovation on show. But this was soon to change.

"I was at a point in my life where I was all about breaking rules and going against the establishment," says Kronos founder Stan Liu. "We were cranking out a bunch of crappy projects to pay the bills and in doing so getting a terrible reputation. So I made a conscious decision to stop that and focus on creating something truly different." Liu knew that the only way to achieve this was to throw away all the established rules and come up with some new ones. "The concept had been in my head for a very long time. It was a time in the industry when everyone was saying 'Story doesn't matter' and to me that was just ludicrous! How can someone care about the gameplay if they don't care about the story or characters?"

OUR ORIGINAL TITLE WAS FEAR FACTOR, WHICH I REALLY LIKED

Fear Effect's story was inspired by an infamous area of Hong Kong. Comprising of 300 interconnected high-rise structures and with not one brick placed as per the plan of an architect, it was home to thousands of people and yet occupied just 6.5 acres. By the early Nineties, the walled city of Kowloon was proving too problematic to ignore and was demolished by order of the British and Chinese governments. "Stan [Liu] had this obsession with Kowloon," says John Zuur Platten, writer and director on *Fear Effect*. "It was this wild place where anything would go – houses built on top of houses, wiring and plumbing across streets, no rules, no permits. It was kind of like a human ant farm." What had inspired the Kronos founder was the dystopian feel to Kowloon – the claustrophobic nature of the city and the untamed life that teemed inside it. "Stan wanted to set a story inside this world," continues Platten, "and as we were also fans of Hong Kong action films, we blended those two ideas together." Platten and Liu took this basic premise and expanded it into a full-blown story.

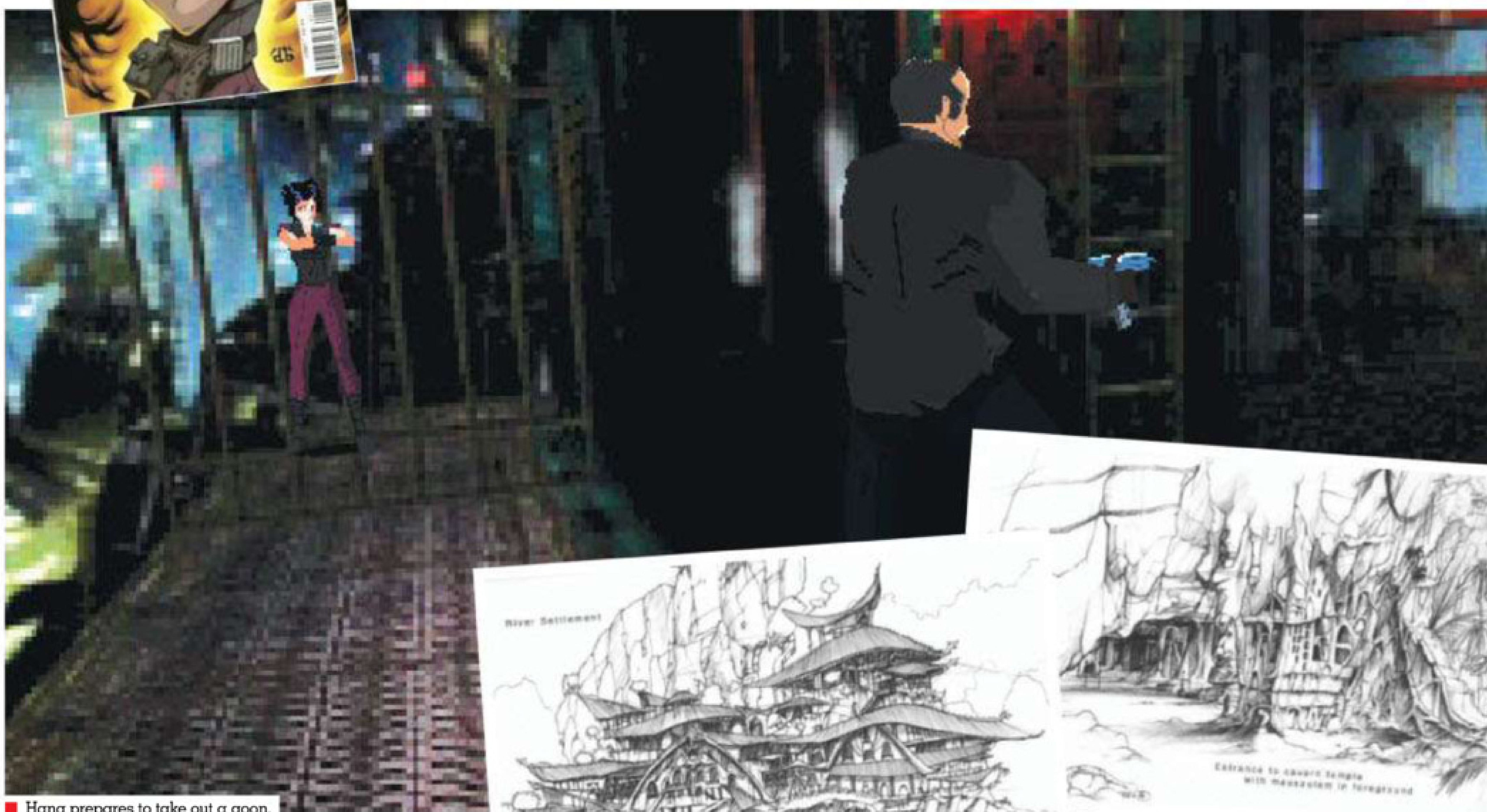
Fear Effect is the tale of three mercenaries: the assassin Hana Tsu-Vachel, a former army officer named Royce Glas and Jacob 'Deke' Decourt, a muscular antipodean who walks 'the fine line between aggressive and psychotic'. When the daughter of a powerful Hong Kong gangster disappears, the trio see an opportunity to obtain a sizeable sum of cash in exchange for her safe return. 'My father has kept a horrible secret from me,' says the character Wee Ming Lam in a note from *Fear Effect*'s manual. 'I have never met my mother. My father says that she is dead. I am

■ *Fear Effect*'s story lent itself well to this comic adaptation.





■ Hana could crouch and sneak with kills in this mode gaining her health.



■ Hana prepares to take out a goon.






The futuristic tone is set early on with this first cutscene.

FEAR EFFECT: THE MOVIE

To hell with it

HAVING BEGUN his career in traditional media, John Zuur Platten was involved on a number of projects while working at Universal Studios. After getting a chance to write for a TV series (*Harry And The Hendersons*), he moved into visual effects and game design. Ten years ago he sold an undeveloped game design to Miramax which became the film *Venom* (2005). "I was actually approached a few years ago about a film adaptation of *Fear Effect*," he recalls. "However, the conversations reached a dead-end when the IP moved to a new publisher after Eidos collapsed." Eidos, keen to capitalise on the success of the *Tomb Raider* movies, sold the rights to Boll KG, the production company of infamous director Uwe Boll, in 2004. With subsequent reports suggesting an impasse between Boll and Eidos thanks to some promised rights to *Hitman* that failed to appear, The *Hollywood Reporter* announced in 2006 that Mindfire Entertainment would be producing the film with Jackie Chan veteran director Stanley Tong at the helm. However, when Eidos was acquired by Square Enix in 2009, all news of the film quietly disappeared. Given the history of game to movie adaptations, maybe it's not such a bad thing?



no longer sure I believe him. I will not be separated from the truth.' From its very beginning, *Fear Effect* hints at much more than a simple kidnap plot. "We felt the story had a supernatural component to start with," says Platten, "so it was exciting to see where it would take us."

The basic gameplay of *Fear Effect* would be, on the surface, similar to the *Resident Evil* games, which had been such an outstanding success on the PlayStation. Then, from its novel setting, a stylistic deviation from Capcom's famous series grew organically. "The cyberpunk setting gave us a chance to push new technology into a crumbling environment," says Platten, "and we liked the contrast. And going with the painterly style for the backgrounds and cel-shader for the characters gave us a unique anime-look which helped distinguish the game from *Tomb Raider*." That game had been publisher Eidos' big hit to date and Kronos was keen to ensure its effort would not be dismissed as a mere derivative. By the time Platten arrived at the developer, fresh from writing and producing the Sega CD game *Tomcat Alley*, a number of steps had already been made to get the game noticed by publishers, specifically Eidos.

"My job initially was to reboot everything, fix the major issues and bring some creative vision that complemented and expanded on Stan's original concept," says Platten. "And I thought the anime style would suit the project well." However, when Kronos submitted some early designs to Eidos, the publisher was less than enthused. "We couldn't understand it – everyone on the team thought it was perfect," says Platten, while Stan Liu recalls the reaction from Eidos' president when they first pitched the concept. "His very first question to me after the presentation was, 'Just exactly how much of this is only cool in your head, Stan?' Because the game was so different, it was new territory for all of us."

The solution was a one-sheet poster with John Paik's characters posing in front of a background painting beautifully crafted by art director Pakin Liptawat. "We printed it up and sent it to Eidos. After that, we shared a vision." says Platten. Working hand-in-hand with him was coder Mike Fernie. "He never balked at any of my crazy ideas," laughs Platten, "including the FMV backgrounds. Usually, he would have something working the next day, so from a technical standpoint, everyone had confidence we could pull it off." With an established artistic pedigree in place, the developer put together an impressive demo which showcased in the fullest way possible the distinct visual style that *Fear Effect* was to have. Fernie himself describes in more detail how the demo worked.


Fear Effect's leads have more character than most of this era.

WHAT THEY SAID…



Fear Effect is an amazing game, full of action, puzzles and characters you actually give a damn about. The solid integration of visual design and solid gameplay makes Fear Effect a must for any survival horror or action-adventure fan **GamePro**

"I was tasked with working on the prototype that pushed some crazy ideas such as real-time camera moves while playing FMV in the background. Many elements from the main game were in this short demo, including the cel-shaded look, the gun-tracking, FMV backgrounds, character switching and 3D objects blending with 2D ones." During the prototype's development, Fernie recalls 'nothing was off limits'. It worked, and the publisher signed on the dotted line with little delay.

At this point it was a game with no name. "Then our first title was *Fear Factor*, which I really liked." says Platten. Subsequently, when the game was demoed at an E3 show, all hell broke loose as Fernie describes. "The girlfriend of one of the band Fear Factory came over to me while I was at the Eidos Booth. She told me that her boyfriend was going to be upset because we were trying to use the band's name to get noticed." When the singer duly appeared the next day, it was decided to drop the name, just in case. "I think we had a good defence to keep the name," notes Platten, "but I guess Eidos didn't want the fight. Although I remember at one point there was some discussion that the band might actually contribute to the soundtrack." Kronos held an informal contest for its employees to suggest a new name. Fernie's choice won, and *Fear Effect* was born.

Development of *Fear Effect* began apace in 1998. The demo had set the standard for the team to live up to, although the memory restriction of the CD format was relentless. "The whole tech of playing FMV in the backgrounds while running the game at a good frame-rate was a constant struggle," recalls Fernie, "and I spent a lot of time trying to come up with ways of saving memory." *Fear Effect*'s ambition would be its curse; once the team had broken the barrier of static backgrounds, anything that was not animated in some way simply looked too anomalous to use. "So that meant trying to find things to animate in each shot," continues Fernie, "and each of these of course took up disc space. I remember going through shots and cutting down on the frames for certain scenes, just to make space." Platten adds: "We were



We think they're dead, Hana…

I MADE A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO STOP… AND FOCUS ON CREATING SOMETHING TRULY DIFFERENT

running a hidden 3D world, for collision geometry, over streams of looping video. Nothing like it had ever been attempted, certainly not on that scale. It was a tribute to Mike and the other programmers that they were able to pull it off." One of Fernie's space solutions was to partition some of *Fear Effect*'s video assets outside the 'safe' area of the game discs. "We had to sign a waiver saying that it was going to work and wouldn't cause any problems," he says, "but it was the only way we could fit in all the assets."

In addition to the technical challenges, *Fear Effect*'s gameplay presented a gamble for Kronos and Eidos. "The game demanded a lot; it was basically an interactive story," says Platten. "It had shooting and puzzles, but at its core it was a narrative that the player revealed via interaction. It had a new look, new characters and new gameplay. It was a big risk." In a jump from traditional videogame protagonists, Platten and Liu made all three lead characters morally

Despite the occasional scene being certainly tailored for a specific audience, shall we say, *Fear Effect* was still relatively progressive with its inclusion of a bisexual character..




The game used multiple camera angles to enhance the cinematic effect.



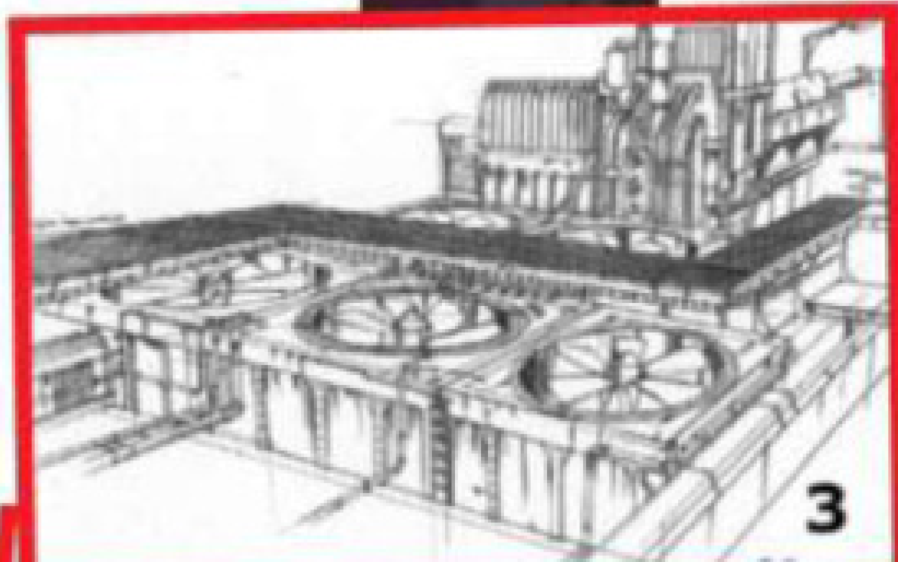
ambiguous anti-heroes; they were, after all, plotting to kidnap and ransom a young girl. "Again, part of this was a reaction to *Tomb Raider*," explains Platten, "as Hana was living at the same publisher as Lara Croft. We didn't want to compete with this massive franchise character, so by making her morally darker – and cel-shaded – we were able to have her co-exist without treading the same territory.

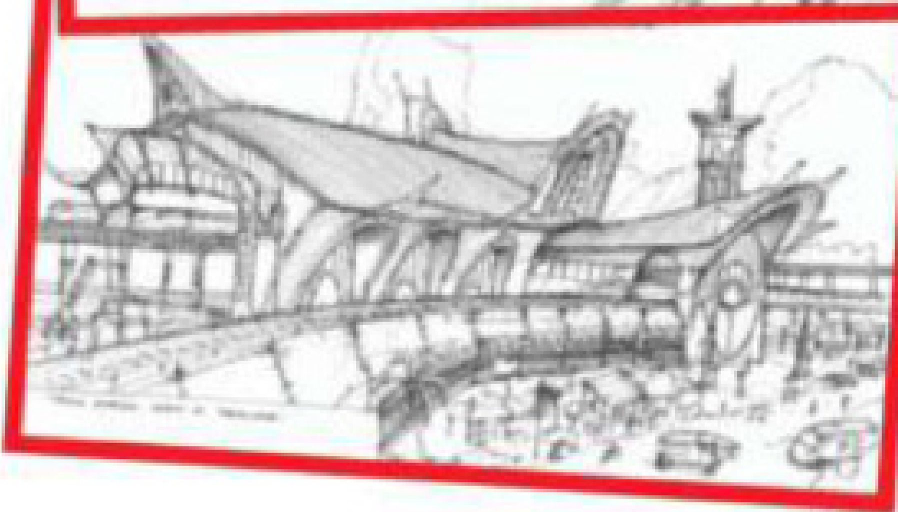
"We realised we were taking a chance," he says, "but everyone from Stan on down agreed that it was worth the effort." The plot to *Fear Effect* would also take a macabre twist or two before its conclusion. Beginning with Hana infiltrating the Lam Building, the game appears to be on firm cyberpunk/*Metal Gear Solid* territory as the feisty mercenary seeks out her contact. Part two brings a twist, however, as the three find themselves transported to a zombie-infested rural village. By the end, the player would have fended off a variety of demons and ghosts as they travel to the far reaches of hell itself. "The Chinese version of hell hadn't been seen in a videogame before so it was exciting to see where it would take us." says Platten.

Fear Effect was becoming a game of firsts. Determined that not only the FMV backgrounds and saturnine plot would help the game stand out, the development team devised a method of monitoring a character's health without resorting to the standard systems of then, and indeed still today. "The life bar was one of those ideas born out of necessity," explains Platten, "as we didn't want to have the player constantly going back to the beginning of a level. We didn't want to have a collectable system like in the *Resident Evil* games, so we thought let's reward players for completing an action in the game." The bar sat at the top of the screen and pulsed green when the player's character was in good health. Take too much damage and it glowed orange and beat faster. The player alleviated this by completing 'relaxing' tasks such as solving a puzzle or stealthily taking out an enemy.

FEAR EFFECT WAS STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

Yet *Fear Effect* did resemble Capcom's famous franchise in one major way: the controls. "We did try a bunch of control ideas," recalls Fernie, "although I'm not sure why we ended up with the tank. It could have been because they were popular or maybe the game just worked better." Platten admits there was conflict over the controls. "We fought like crazy over it. I wanted a consistent control throughout. In the end, I lost." Adam Maxwell, who was brought on board towards the end of the project to help with design and certain mechanics, recalls in more detail the battle of the controls. "John, myself and every





> GAMING EVOLUTION Resident Evil > Fear Effect > Fear Effect 2

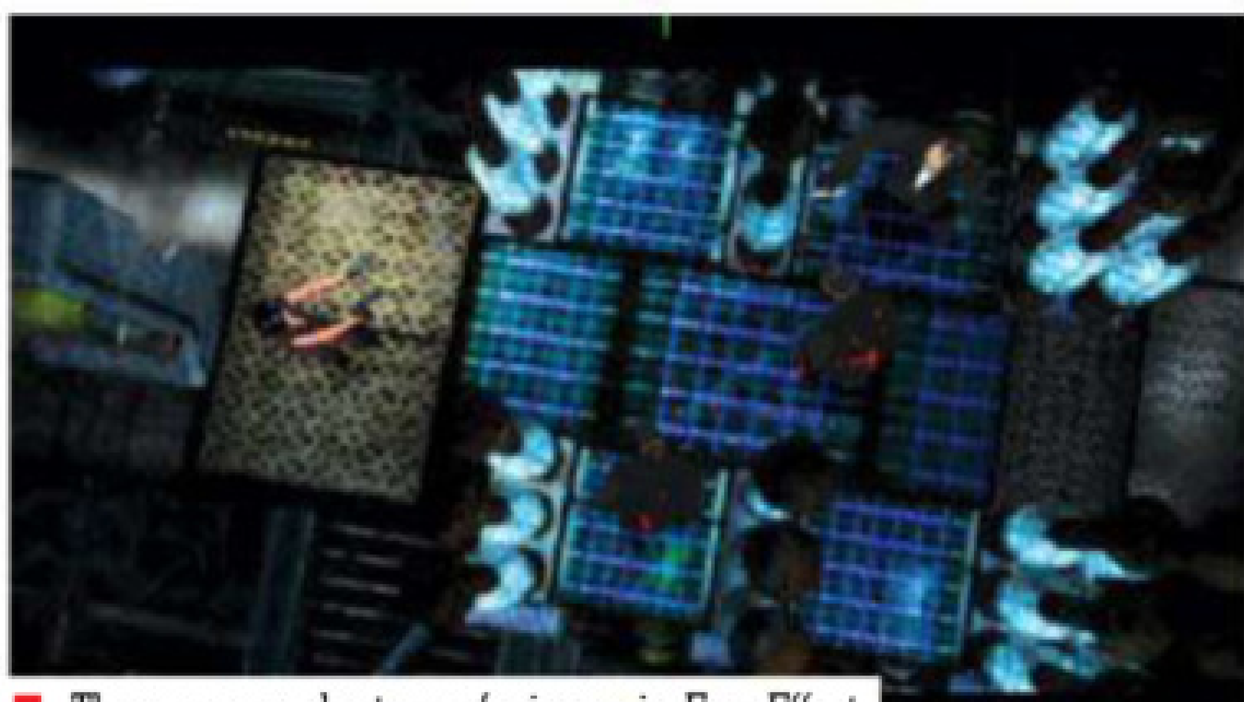


3D models with pre-rendered backgrounds was a hallmark of Capcom's first three *Resident Evil* games. You know, the good ones.



Listening to criticism of the first game, Kronos streamlined the gameplay and created a hugely improved experience for *2*.





■ There was no shortage of crimson in *Fear Effect*.



■ You can clearly see *Fear Effect*'s comic book influences.

designer on the team all weighed in and tried different configurations," he says. "The trick was that the fixed camera angles of every scene often screwed with the player's sense of where their character would go and when they used the controls. The tank controls made that less of an issue, so that's why we ultimately went with them. But we all knew we were settling."

The team's grandiose ideas also meant that further technical restrictions were inevitable. "There were locations that we needed to cut," says Fernie, "and of course that also meant that huge sections of the story also had to change." The reason for the cuts were two-fold – time, and being unable to fit all the video onto the four discs. "I would have liked to have included 3D sections where part of the background were 3D models," continues Fernie, "and we ended up doing this to a limited degree on *Fear Effect 2*. I wish I could have also cut down on the load times."

This latter point was one of many criticisms levelled at *Fear Effect* upon release. Despite decent scores, most reviewers pulled the game up on multiple issues such as its controls, obscure puzzles, a frustrating difficulty level and an unfair accusation of style over substance. "*Fear Effect* was style *and* substance," exclaims a vexed Platten. "At the time we felt gameplay had become very much 'get briefing, shoot everything, break crates'. Meh. We tried to bring something different to the party."

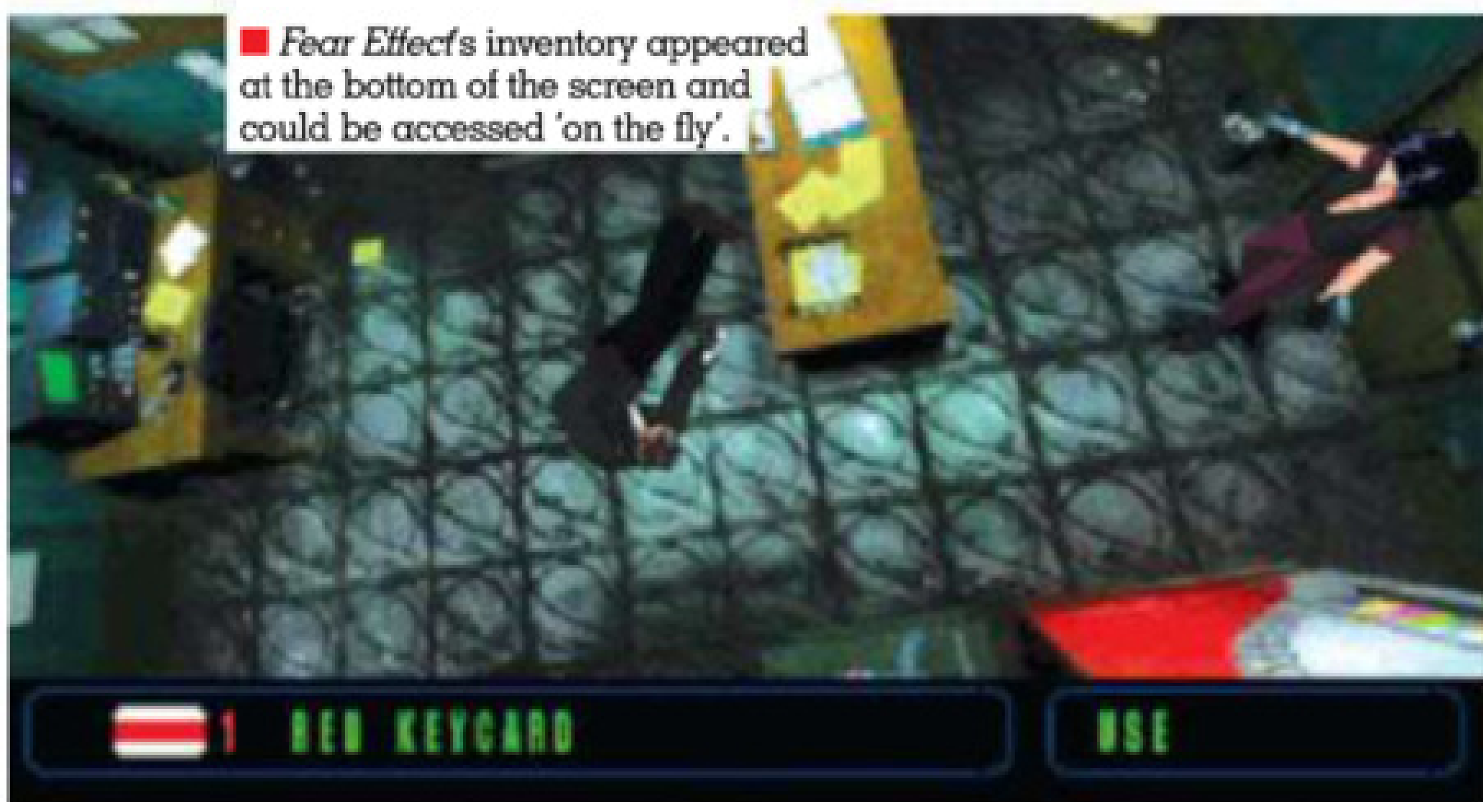
Platten's fellow designer Adam Maxwell agrees. "Don't get me wrong, style was a keystone of the project," he says, "but there's a lot of substance there, especially in the story. The mercenaries at the heart of the plot were very complex characters." As to the puzzles, Maxwell bravely holds his hand up to this one. "I have to take the blame for some of this. I made a puzzle, in Madame Chen's lair, that was essentially impossible. I think we made changes right before launch to try and make it better, but that was totally my bad." Much of the testing was done by the team themselves, and this naturally led them to finding the puzzles easier than they actually were. "We did focus tests and also internal and external QA," recalls Fernie, "and I'm sure that helped. But, yes, many people complained that the puzzles were too hard when the game came out."

Fear Effect was published early in 2000. Unsure of what it had on its hands, Eidos failed to commission any further ports, leaving the Sony PlayStation version as the sole release. The game was successful enough to inspire a follow-up (which actually covered events prior to the first game) but a planned third entry in the series, for the PlayStation 2, was cancelled in 2003. "I see *Fear Effect* as a highlight in my career," notes Fernie. "It felt like we were trying to do something different and were pushing the limits. I also thought the look of the game really set it apart, although there were people at Sony who told us it would never work." Designer John Zuur Platten says, "To this day I have fond memories of the game and development team. There was so much talent in that building it was like a bull in china shop sometimes, but everyone put up with me and together we created something of which we can all still be proud. And that's about as good as it gets."

But we leave the final word to the man who conceived the original concept, Kronos founder Stan Liu. "We were all flying by the seat of our pants, making shit up as we went.," he smiles. "But everyone was on board as we believed in the project, and we all gave it our best. *Fear Effect* was not a perfect game by any standard, but it was a renaissance for Kronos. And I was lucky to have the support of such a strong team."

games™ *would like to thank Stan Liu, John Zuur Platten, Mike Fernie and Adam Maxwell for their time.*





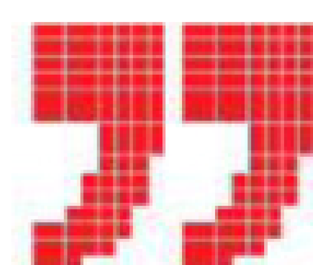
■ *Fear Effect*'s inventory appeared at the bottom of the screen and could be accessed 'on the fly'.

WHAT THEY SAID...



Fear Effect really sticks out from the crowd. It's a unique game with a rich blend of action, puzzles, and an unusual story, and in the fifth year of the PlayStation, nothing could have arrived at a better time. It's a keeper

IGN



TO HELL AND BACK

Creator Stan Liu takes us through some of Fear Effect's innovations and challenges



■ ON CINEMATIC SEAMLESS FLOW: "I didn't want the gameplay and story as separate elements. If set up properly, the player would know what was going on."

ON REAL-TIME INVENTORY SYSTEMS: "I was strongly against the mechanic of stopping the game to bring up a full-screen inventory. To me that just destroyed any suspension of disbelief."

ON RESOUNDLY EMPTY BINS: "I was adamant about not finding bullets and med kits in trash cans and such like. But we had to balance the gameplay finely so the character had just enough ammo."

ON A THREE-PRONGED STORY: "We worked a lot on arcing the story through the views of three different characters. I got a lot of push-back from the team and publisher early on because I wanted the multiple characters."

THE LIFE-METER: "I didn't want it at all on screen. There's no life-meter in real life! However, I got voted out."



RETRO

INTERVIEW

PREMIER LEAGUE CHAMPION

games™ sits down with Miles Jacobson, who has been working with Sports Interactive for twenty years to make it the best football sim developer in the world

For most people, football games mean *FIFA* and *PES*, but while EA and Konami have battled it out for supremacy Sports Interactive has seen off all competition with its *Football Manager* brand. As the top-tier management simulation game in the world, *Football Manager* shook off SI's brand shift in 2004, leaving Eidos and *Championship Manager* behind to start a new soccer empire. Having spoken with Miles's about his 'Champo' days we picked up again at the dawn of *Football Manager* and its evolution since.



Back in 2004 you had left Eidos and were working on a new game with Sega. What was the mood and mindset of the studio heading into that first *Football Manager*?

The weird thing is, no one cared. We'd spoken to everyone; we all knew what was happening. There were probably about 25 of us there when we started working on that and everyone just turned around and said, 'yeah, fine, that's the right thing to do. We want to stay together.' There were a couple of other studios at that point who had decided to be cheeky and phoned every single person in the studio, one of them even called me, to try and poach them to move across. Again, we were all having a bit of fun with this. One of our team, he was actually an American guy and one of the few people we had to get a work permit for, he was getting very pissed off because he was the only person who wasn't getting a call. And he was one of our best programmers as well. Obviously they didn't want the hassle of work permits. A couple of [us] actually went for lunch with a couple of studios that were trying to poach them, just to find out what they were going on about. So it became a running joke in the office going, 'yay, I got the call', and then they'd just carry on working.

We had terms that we had sent out to the publishers of 'this is what we're looking for', and they had all agreed them, so we were getting on well with Sega, but it was trying to make that final decision. That came about because we sent a fax around saying that we wanted to give a donation to a charity of our choice for every game we sold and about 30 seconds later we got a fax back from Sega saying 'fine.' So it was like, 'okay, they were the first to say yes, shall we sign with Sega?', and we're just getting on with the game anyway.

We were curious how the Sega deal came about – so you were putting yourselves out there and Sega were the first to agree to your terms?

We'd spoken to lots of publishers about *NHL Eastside Hockey Manager* and at that time we didn't know we were going anywhere, but there were certainly rumours going around that it was being considered. Sega had done the *Eastside* deal and made it clear to us that it wanted to work with us on any titles that we did, but a lot of other publishers had been saying the same to us. We were certainly talking to a lot of people and everyone was agreeing the terms, but Sega [was] the first to say yes on the charity side of things and we had

WE WERE KIND OF A VERY LARGE BEDROOM DEVELOPER, WHEREAS NOW WE'RE A VERY LARGE DEVELOPER WITH OUR ROOTS IN OUR BEDROOMS

KEEPING IT AUTHENTIC

■■■ We have clubs we talk to regularly, we have over 700 footballers who help us test the game. They get early builds of the game, well before the beta goes out, because getting feedback from people who are playing the sport or chief executives or who are scouts or who are press officers at clubs is all really important [in order] to try and make the game as authentic as possible.

SLOW ITERATION

■■■ Some would argue that we should just double the size of the dev team and then do everything in one year, but the problem with that is that some of the features wouldn't work well together, so the groups of features that we're looking at doing would only work well if other stuff was introduced first and people were able to get used to it. We are an annual iteration game and while there tends to be a lot of evolution every year and a little bit of revolution, that little bit of revolution takes people time to get used to.



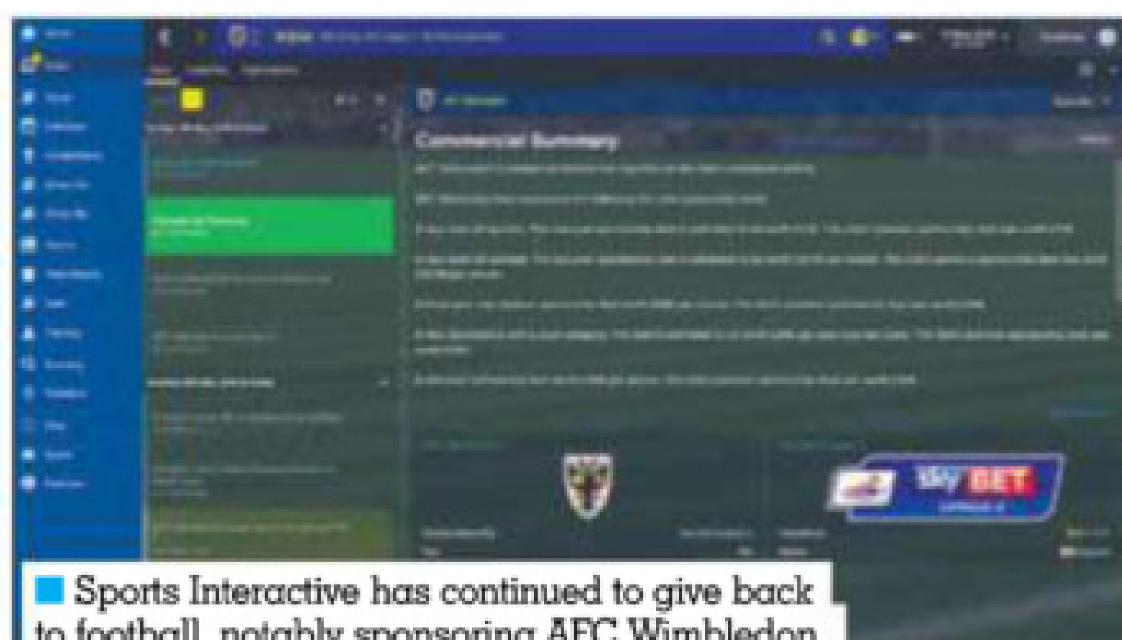
The matchday engine has become increasingly sophisticated, from plain text, through to moving icons and now a fully 3D-simulated fixture.



a really good relationship with them anyway. I really liked Tsurumi-san (Naoya Tsurumi, Sega Europe CEO), Mike Sherlock (executive VP of sales and marketing), Matt Woodley (European marketing director) and a lot of the people who were there at the time. Plus, if you actually look back at the time that we signed with them, it was just after Dreamcast and they were reinventing themselves as a company and we were needing to reinvent ourselves as well as a studio with a new brand.

You mentioned that the team was about 25-strong when you started *Football Manager*, but what was the makeup of that team?

It was mainly programmers, to be honest. You know, we've always been quite programmer heavy as a studio. In fact, I'm not even sure we had a producer at that point, because Grant [Appleyard] was still programming on *Eastside Hockey* and he was our first official producer, so I was doing all the production work as well as the other bits and bobs that I was doing. I had just gone full-time at that point. So we didn't have a producer, it was mainly programmers, we probably had two artists, a couple of people in research, one person doing admin and that was it. Whereas now there are 98 of us as of today, but there will be about 100 of us in about two weeks. And again, the split is largely programmers, but we also have a full QA team here, we have a full marketing and communications team here as well.



Sports Interactive has continued to give back to football, notably sponsoring AFC Wimbledon.

What about the size of your research and scouting teams today, compared to how it was back then?

We still had the 51 head researchers and probably had about 800 to 900 scouts at that point, whereas now we have about 1,300. It fluctuates between 1,300 and 1,500.

How have your day-to-day duties changed over the last decade?

At that time we were a fully, 100 per cent independent company living from hand to mouth. I don't believe in debt so we didn't have a bank overdraft, let alone anything else on that score. I was kind of in my element going around, trying to do deals with people, having been in the music industry on the other side of the table for years while doing SI very much part-time. I did the production side of things and I kind of coordinated a lot of the dev work, but I was less creative then than probably I am now. But we were completely disorganised as well on the development side of things. The reason then that we didn't have feature lists until the very last minute is that people were just cracking on with what they wanted to get on with. We were kind of a very large bedroom developer, whereas now we're a very large developer with our roots in our bedrooms.

How did you start to bring a little organisation to your development process? Are you now planning games more in advance?

Yeah, we are. At the time it was not being done like that at all. People were basically working on what they wanted to and that meant that quite a few things were getting missed. So, we set about trying to change that and it's how we came up with the idea for the features database. Whenever anyone had an idea for the game, whether it be someone in the studio or somebody external, whether it's something we see on our forums or that a footballer tells us about or something that we dream about or something we overhear in a pub, it gets put into the features database. Then once a year we sit down as a team and go through all of the new ideas that come in that year, and we vote on them. Everyone in the studio is invited to those meetings, all of those features are anonymous, so it doesn't matter whether something's come directly from me or whether it's come from a pub conversation, it all gets treated exactly the same. And the votes that come in are basically the priority for that feature.

Has it been interesting to see how the way people play *Football Manager* has changed, moving away from sitting in front of a PC to mobile and laptop?

With the Vita game we took that to another stage, to being able to take your PC save



The team behind the game has always been mostly programmers, supported by hundreds of scouts.

game out with you on the move. That's certainly something that interests us a lot for the future as tablets and phones start getting better. For many years I kept telling people that tablets are just giant phones you can't make phone calls on. They are turning more and more into computers now and I think the possibilities there for us for a seamless play experience are pretty strong for the future.

One of the highlights of playing *Football Manager* as a fan was always being able to spot and then watch players develop into real-world superstars. Are there any examples that you're particularly fond of?

Yeah, countless examples. My favourite is always going to be Lionel Messi. In the days before child-protection law, we could have players under the age of 16 in the game. This very short 13-year-old at Barcelona becomes the best player in the world. Up in Scotland a young lad called Jon is telling his dad Alex about how this guy becomes the best player in the world and his dad happened to be a real-life football manager, managing Rangers. A couple of years down the line, when Alex finally sees the guy playing, he does try to sign him on loan for Rangers as a 16-year-old, gets knocked back, but gets offered Andre Iniesta instead. He doesn't pick Iniesta up for the weekend because he's checking with his son whether Iniesta becomes a good player or not.

It's those kinds of stories I love and it's one of the reasons why we made the documentary (*An Alternative Reality: The Football Manager Documentary*) this year. Having Alex McLeish and his son Jon – who is now a football agent – tell that story in there was quite emotional for me, and a very powerful thing.

There's a few that we get wrong each year, but when you're dealing with 600,000-plus people in data form, having a failure rate of ten out of 600,000 a year is pretty damn good, really. People often bring up the To Madeiras and Tonton Zola-Moukokos of this world. In the case of To Madeira; yes, we were the only people in the world who thought he was going to be a great player, because he wasn't a footballer, but with the others we've got wrong over that time it wasn't just us who got them wrong, it was also other people in the sport. The fact that our data now gets used for clubs in that way is something that means a lot to everyone here.

WHEN YOU'RE DEALING WITH 600,000-PLUS PEOPLE IN DATA FORM, HAVING A FAILURE RATE OF TEN OUT OF 600,000 A YEAR IS PRETTY DAMN GOOD, REALLY

And presumably football has modernised and embraced statistics and the kind of analysis you've been doing for years as part of its processes.

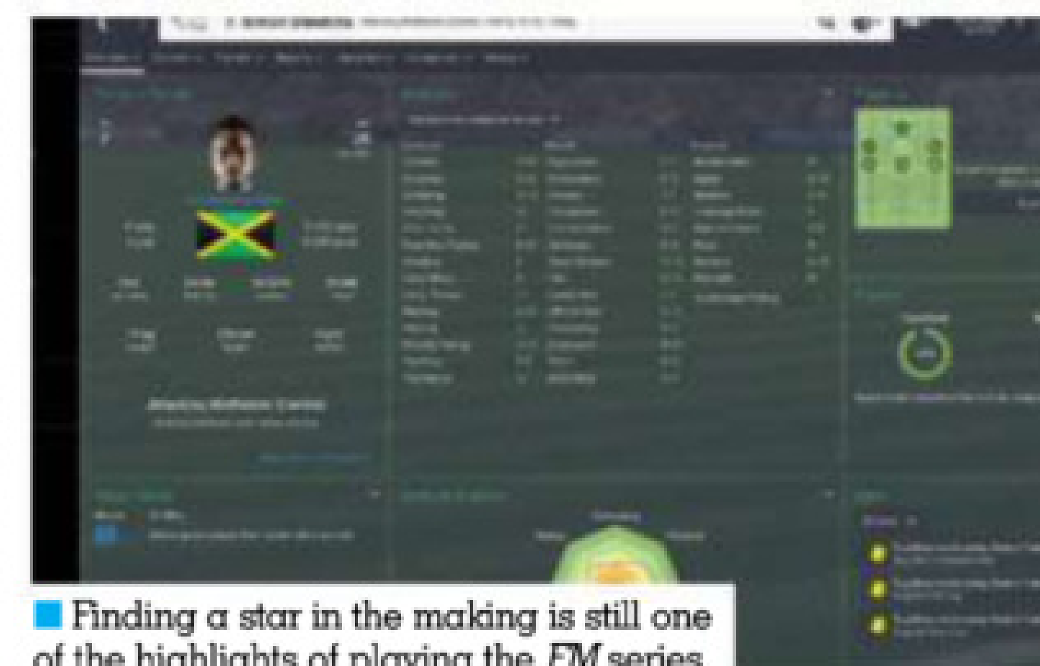
Absolutely, but if you were to talk to the guys at Opta and asked them why they set up in the first place, they'll also sight our work as one of the reasons that they set up. They just came up with a business model for doing some of the stuff that we were doing already, and good on them. I think we have all helped each other out over the years in the way that those areas have become a part of football.

You've also been involved in Games Aid and War Child. Could you tell us a little about that?

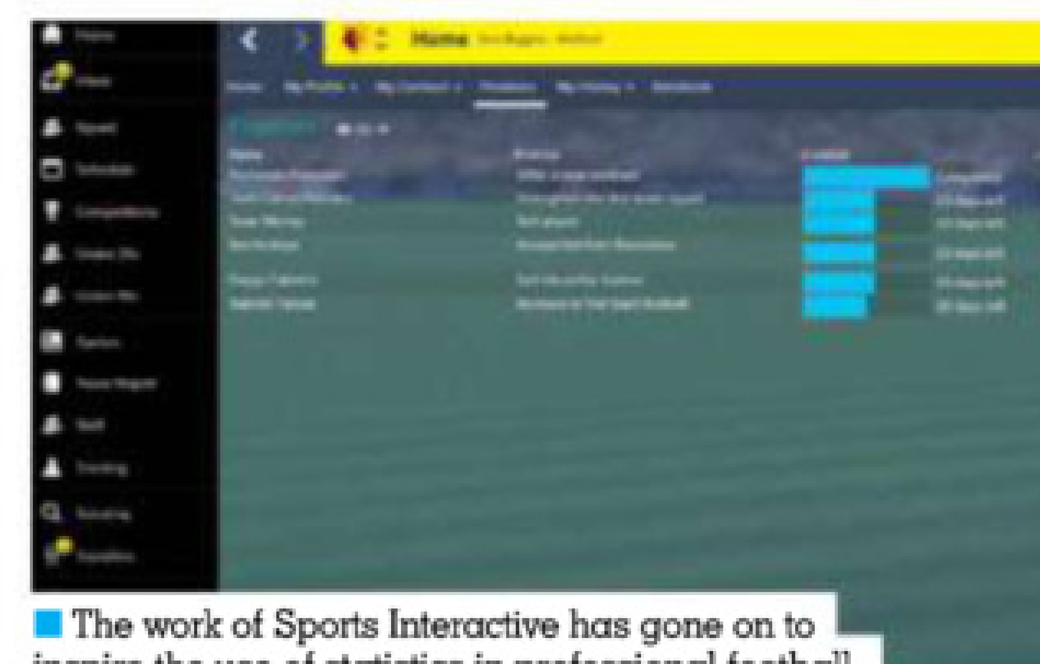
I don't want to come across all Bono, but when we did the deal with Sega there was the charity element to it and War Child, the charity that we work with. We actually had meetings with a bunch of charities who didn't believe us when we said 'we want to give you a cheque every year, is that okay?' They are a charity that I had worked with in the music industry and [they] have a really simple premise, which is no child has ever started a war, so no child should be affected by war.

I work with them away from just the donation side of things because I'm on their entertainment committee as well. We put on concerts once a year and we've got a very big project that we're working on, which will have a games element to it for the New Year, which hopefully I'll be able to talk about around Easter time. It will be the next stage in the Help project they've been working on for 20 years. So, I work with them, I work with a music-therapy charity called Nordoff Robbins where I help put on a football dinner once a year, called The Football Extravaganza. Over the last few years we've had the likes of Pele as the guest of honour and this year it was Ryan Giggs. We've had Mourinho, Sir Alex Ferguson, Eric Cantona, etc. So that's always a good night and quite well supported by others in the games industry as well, which is fantastic.

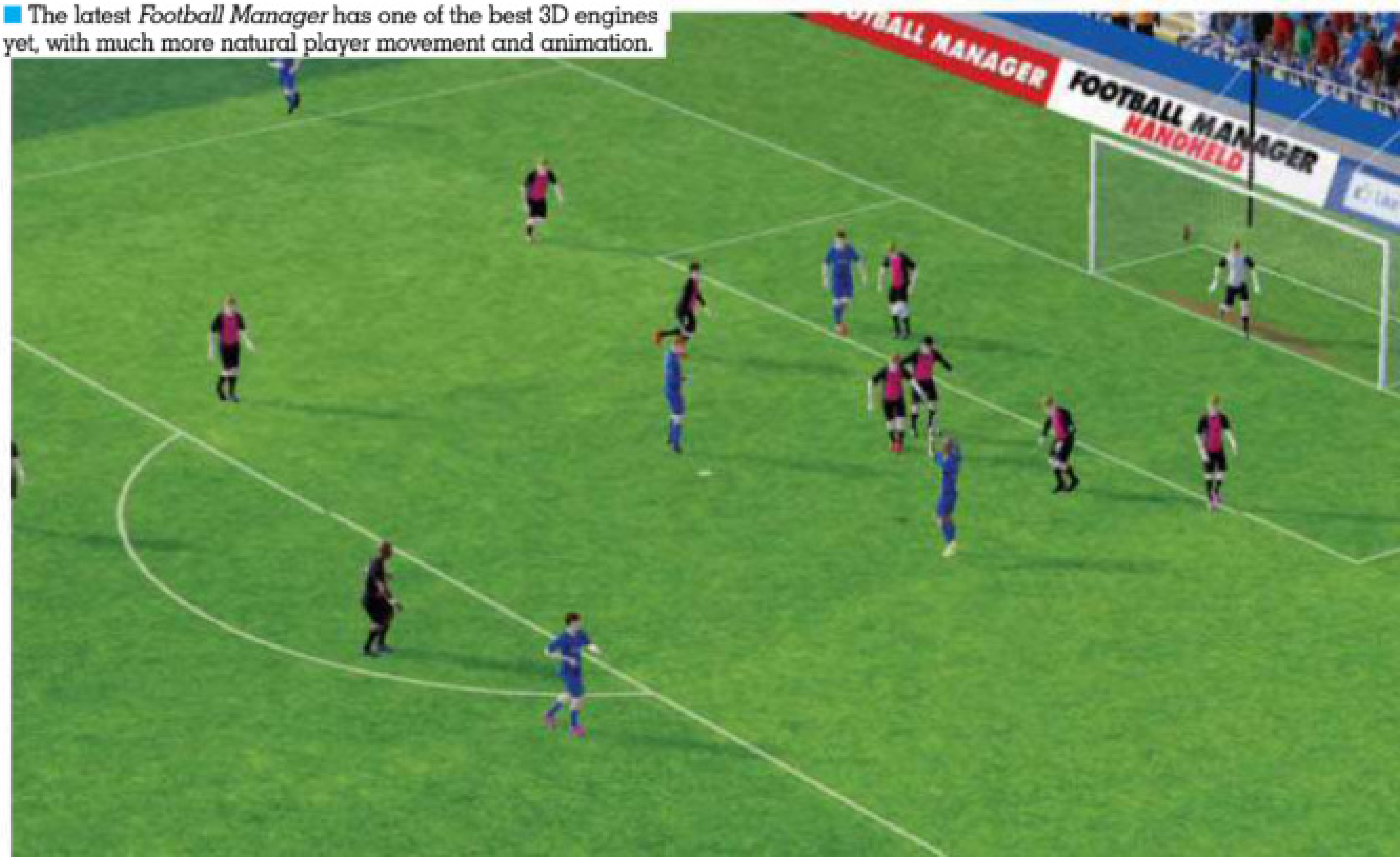
I was one of the co-founders of Games Aid, as basically the Entertainment Software Charity had run its course really, and a few of us got together to rebrand it, reinvigorate it and try and get more people in the industry involved. As part of that we made a maximum term you're allowed to serve as a trustee, so while I was one of the founders and I still do the due diligence on all the charities for them, I'm not involved on a day-to-day basis anymore. The people who are involved now have taken it to a much bigger level than I ever dreamed it could possibly get to. I think they've done a phenomenal job.



Finding a star in the making is still one of the highlights of playing the *FM* series.



The work of Sports Interactive has gone on to inspire the use of statistics in professional football.



The latest *Football Manager* has one of the best 3D engines yet, with much more natural player movement and animation.

GAME CHANGERS

COMMAND & CONQUER

Released: August, 1995 **Publisher:** Virgin Interactive **Developer:** Westwood Studios **System:** PC, Mac, PlayStation, Sega Saturn, Nintendo 64



Louis Castle – one of Westwood's two founders – continued to find success in the top-down games market when he joined Zynga Studios as the vice president

We travel back to the birth of Westwood's award-winning, genre-cementing franchise to examine the solid foundations the studio built its success upon

COMMAND & CONQUER is a name that grabs your attention. Right off the bat, it issues you with gameplay instructions. That was always the desired effect of Westwood cofounder Brett Sperry who was 'fanatical' about naming the game after its core gameplay objectives, according to other Westwood staff.

And it was a smart idea. Back in 1995, in the United Nation's so-called 'Year of Tolerance', with Chechnya keeping the fires of war lit for another year, there were political tensions generating anxiety in western civilisations. By making the world of *Command & Conquer* feel uncannily similar, yet without attributing nationalities or races to the game's not-as-binary-as-you'd-think Global Defence Force and Brotherhood of NOD, Westwood managed to take a pop at political satire and commentary without coming across as preachy or jingoistic.

But Westwood also brought new gameplay mechanics to the RTS – moving away from the hex map-based systems of its predecessors or the high fantasy of genre rivals at the time. Westwood took the resource management (and isometric viewpoint) it introduced in *Dune 2* and dismantled it, initially reassembling the myriad mechanics as a proto-RTS with wizards and fantasy warriors.

During the game's development – a period of three years which spanned the end of the Gulf War, continued Chechen pressures and growing anxieties around terrorism and religious extremism – the team changed tact: they began crafting a game in a parallel universe, one that artfully sidestepped the sombre imagery of a domestic war.

One way this suspension of disbelief was ushered into the gameplay was via a resource known as 'Tiberium' – a mystical and radioactive mineral that grew in clusters over the realistic landscapes *Command & Conquer* made you fight over. The machines of war on both GDI and NOD sides still felt realistic – like the tanks you'd see rolling over

THE ANATOMY OF COMMAND & CONQUER

COMMAND & CONQUER IS PRACTICALLY SYNONYMOUS WITH THE RTS GENRE, BUT WHAT INSPIRED THE GAME AND MADE IT THE GENRE-DEFINING EXPERIENCE WE KNOW TODAY? GAMES™ INVESTIGATES...



DUNE

★ Westwood's previous work in the RTS genre had set the studio up well for its campaign: by the time *Command & Conquer* was in development, Westwood already had a checklist of mechanics it wanted to fit into the game – things that would work with the Dune IP.



Image: Chatham House

NINETIES POLITICS

★ The global threat of terrorism and the increasingly taut relationship the west shared with, practically, the rest of the world can be seen seeping into everything the story is trying to say. The grey morality of each faction is an interesting spin on the 'west is good, anyone else is bad' trope.



WESTWOOD'S OWN ACTORS

★ Aside from Joseph D. Kucan – who played Kane – there were no other professional actors: the honour of playing the various other heroes and villains fell upon the employees of Westwood themselves, who for budget reasons, usually acted their parts in spare rooms.

Afghan hills on the news – and so did the soldiers you commanded, moving away from the high-fantasy the team was used to in the *Dune* series.

This gave the game a feeling that you were playing with army men, reminiscent of the little green figures popularly sold as children's toys. It took the infantile fantasy and validated it for the older generation – and that was just one facet of what made *Command & Conquer* more addictive and ostensibly playable than its predecessors. Moving away from the grid-based system of past RTS games helped make the gameplay feel more fluid, and the resource gathering mechanic was simple enough to welcome players into the micro-management system without too much of a difficulty curve.

■■■ Players were given the option to indulge in either a sandbox free play mode or play through a campaign, which was fleshed out with live-action FMVs that recruited known actors in a camp – but oddly enjoyable – so-bad-it's-good series of cinematics. These forward-thinking cutscenes helped flesh out the core premise of the game, and give some weight to the battles you were otherwise detached from in your isometric God-like viewpoint. The pacing and layout of the campaign missions was also intentionally structured to be a little arrhythmic – creating a sense of progression that was designed specifically 'to keep players up all night'.

The LAN capabilities of the game were more refined than past RTS games, too – games could last anywhere from a few minutes to hours on end, depending on who was playing who and what their playing style was. The fact a real-time strategy game released in 1995 had a functioning four-player multiplayer mode, too, did wonders for the title's popularity. This facet protected Westwood from the one flaw the game showed through its polished veneer – the AI. Players that had spent hours upon hours complained that the AI elements were predictable, but – aside from scripted moments in the campaign – the AI was only really place-holder anyway: little could liven up the actions and the random element brought in by a human player.

At its root, *Command & Conquer* was a rock-paper-scissors game, but by fusing all the best bits of a heavily strategic, top-down epic with the consequence and urgency offered up by a real-time action game, *Command & Conquer* quickly and easily laid down the foundations for the RTS for generations to come. Even now, little remains changed about the core real time strategy genre, and that's all because of a spiritual successor to the mildly popular *Dune II* game that came out almost 20 years ago.

THESE FORWARD-THINKING CUTSCENES HELPED FLESH OUT THE CORE PREMISE OF THE GAME

KEY FACTS

- The game's key resource – Tiberium – wasn't a Westwood creation and was actually inspired by a science-fiction B-movie called Monolith Monsters.
- The game was more forward-thinking than even the developers realised – the original pitch for the game outlined a future where wars are "fought between western society and a kind of anarchistic terror organisation."
- Westwood secretly coded 'dinosaur levels' into the game – when the publishers saw them, they loved the levels so much they requested the team keep them in.

GAME CHANGERS

THE 10 STRANGEST RTS WEAPONS OF WAR

REAL-TIME STRATEGY GAMES TEND TO PLAY IT PRETTY STRAIGHT – YOUR TOYS ARE USUALLY FAIRLY STANDARD. BUT SOMETIMES, JUST SOMETIMES, THE RTS LIKES TO SMASH THAT INHERENT SENSIBILITY TO BITS…



WAR BEARS

THE BEAR IS a symbol of Soviet Russia – depicting power, strength and resilience. *Red Alert 3* took this one step further, though, giving Russian factions the ability to recruit armoured bears to their sides. Watching a sloth of brown bears (yes, that is what it's called, unfortunately; we were hoping for something a little more aggressive and, well, bear-like) rampage through enemy infantry is *incredibly* satisfying.



HUNTERS

TAKEN FROM THE rich mythology that was set out in the previous *Halo* games, Ensemble Studio's *Halo Wars* had some great units to play with. The most well-realised were probably the Hunters: a unit that deployed as a pair and received increasingly powerful buffs if both were kept alive during combat. It's just one of a number of ways in which *Halo Wars* was actually a very smart and engaging expansion of the franchise.



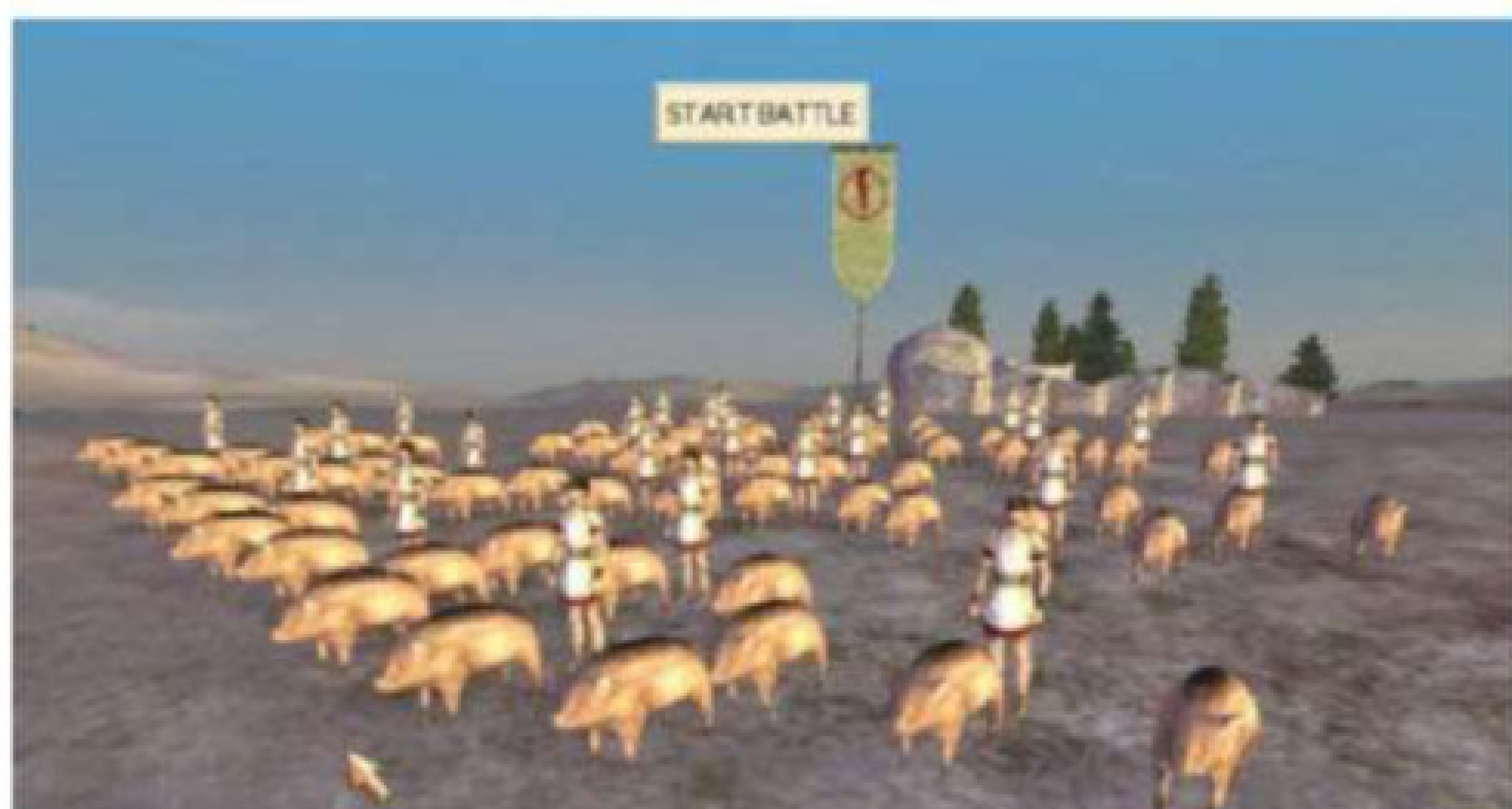
MUTALISK

UNLESS YOU DEPLOYED them en masse, Mutalisks in *StarCraft II* were almost useless – the biological weapons of war were much better supporting ground troops that could dish out better DPS. However, the fact they were born of alien beings that crept into the eggs of another alien bird animal cemented them a place on our list. Not perhaps as effective as some of the other entries, but certainly one of the strangest.



WEIRDBOYZ

ORKS AREN'T TYPICALLY known for their magical prowess – pop culture post-*Lord Of The Rings* firmly puts them in their thuggish brute place – but every now and then an Ork born with a bizarre affinity to the gestalt energies of space is born, and it can channel these powers into his 'boyz'. In *Dawn Of War II*, the Weirdboy also gets access to a move called 'Warp Vomit' – which classes as sniper damage on a hit. Ew.



INCENDIARY PIGS

■ HORRIFICALLY, INCENDIARY PIGS were actually used in real-life war back in the Roman ages; soldiers would coat the poor sow in pitch, tar and oil, light it up and send it screaming into the enemy lines. Flaming pigs could route infantry, mounted troops, combust war machines and even disrupt the mighty elephants of Hannibal, as they do once more in *Rome: Total War*.



CHINESE HACKERS

■ THE FACE OF war changes fairly often, and as such the Chinese factions in *Red Alert 3* began training super hackers that could bring buildings offline with custom-made viruses. Scary, right? They could also 'hack the internet' to provide a constant stream of funds directly into your account. Because that's how the internet works, you know?



ST. FRANCIS

■ OPEN UP YOUR chat box in *Age Of Empires*, type in 'CONVERT THIS!' and voila! You're now in command of the sanctified St. Francis – a priest unit that could move at ungodly speeds and summon lighting to smite any opponent you deem unworthy. Which, if we're feeling smitey, is pretty much everyone. He's nigh unstoppable – just make sure he doesn't get converted by another civilisation's priests…



ROCKTOPUS

■ THE ROCKTOPUS. The name alone makes it worthy of appearing in this top ten list, but its mouth-watering abilities also make it a serious combat-ready threat. Only unlockable by achieving full affinity with the 'Harmony' alignment in *Civilization: Beyond Earth*, the unit's description lists it as a 'bio-engineered, living orbital unit': so it's basically a rock and an octopus. A Rocktopus, if you will.



TOM BOMBADIL

■ TOM IS A hero unit – someone that can only come and lend their support for a short while, rather than a permanent addition to your army – but rather than dive into battle with swords, staves or arrows, Tom just *sings* in *Lord Of The Rings: Battle For Middle-Earth*. He just dances and sings, and his almost deified powers make it the most potent dancing/singing weapon you'll ever see. It almost makes up for his unforgivable omission from the films…



ZOMBONI

■ NOT ONLY DID the enterprising folks over at PopCap think it would be smart to take the Zamboni Ice Resurfacer and wrangle it to fit the undead horde's nefarious motives in *Plant Vs Zombies*, the development team also thought it would be hilarious to have the ice trail it leaves act as an entry path for a Zombie Bobsleigh team. Fantastic creativity. And it's even more fun when you turn the tables and get to use the Zombinis for yourself.

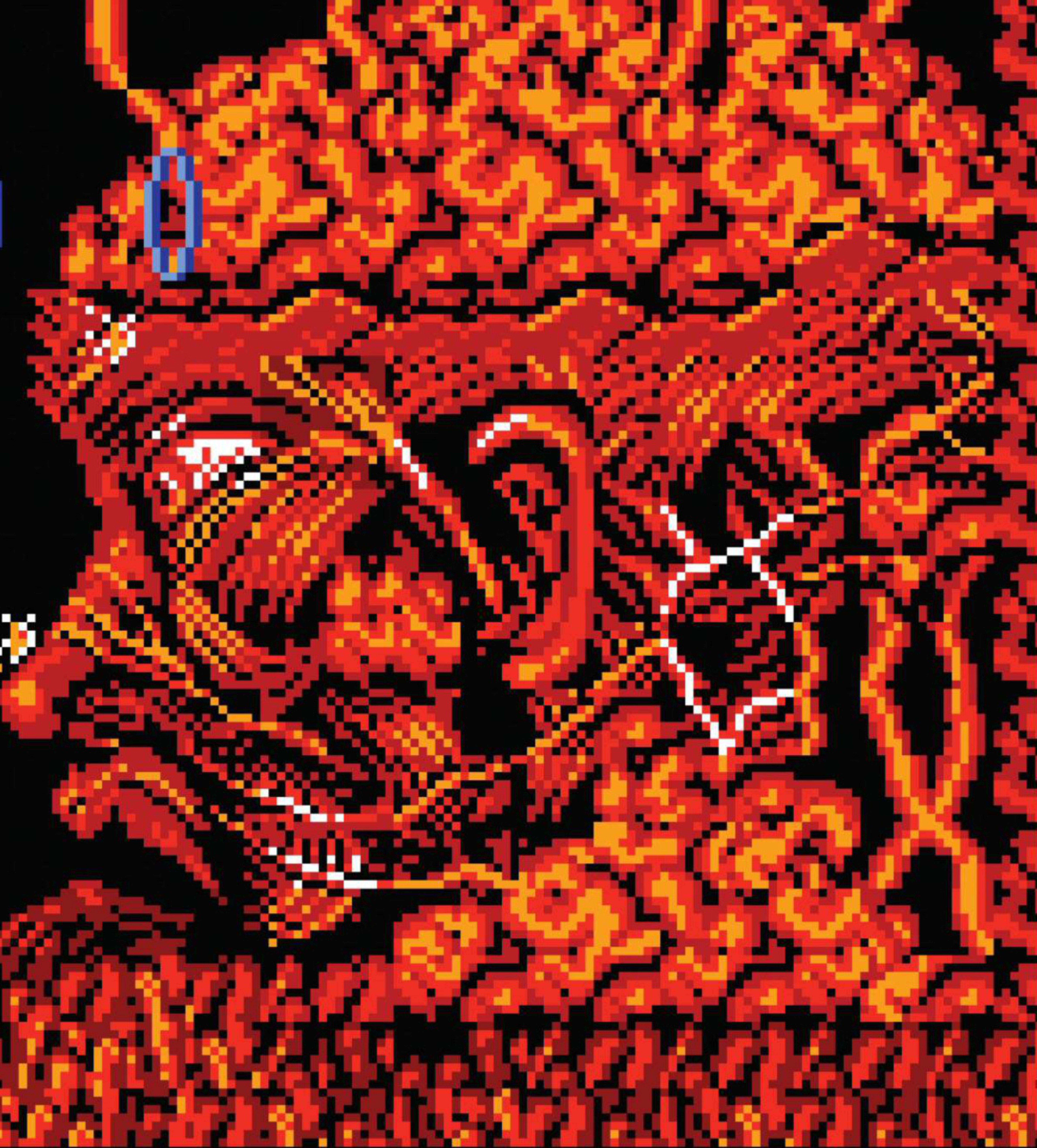


BEST BOSS

GRADIUS II

ARCADE, NES, SEGA SATURN, PLAYSTATION, PSP **1988**

■ In the arcade version of *Gradius II*, confronting Gofer was a bit of an anti-climax – he just sat there, soaking up your bullets until he died. It all felt a little mean, really. He might have said, "I am the strongest. I am just a small portion of the empire bacterian", but he was also defenceless. In the NES version (pictured), Gofer was given a bit more impact as a final boss – he had the ability to spew out balls of energy that could seek the player, or fire wider-area affecting lightning bolts instead. Gofer still wasn't as hard as his appearance would have you believe which, after the sheer bullet hell you'd have gotten through before having the honour of facing him, was a damn shame, but it was still a boss fight to remember for its sharp improvement over previous instalments.


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UBLE
OPTION

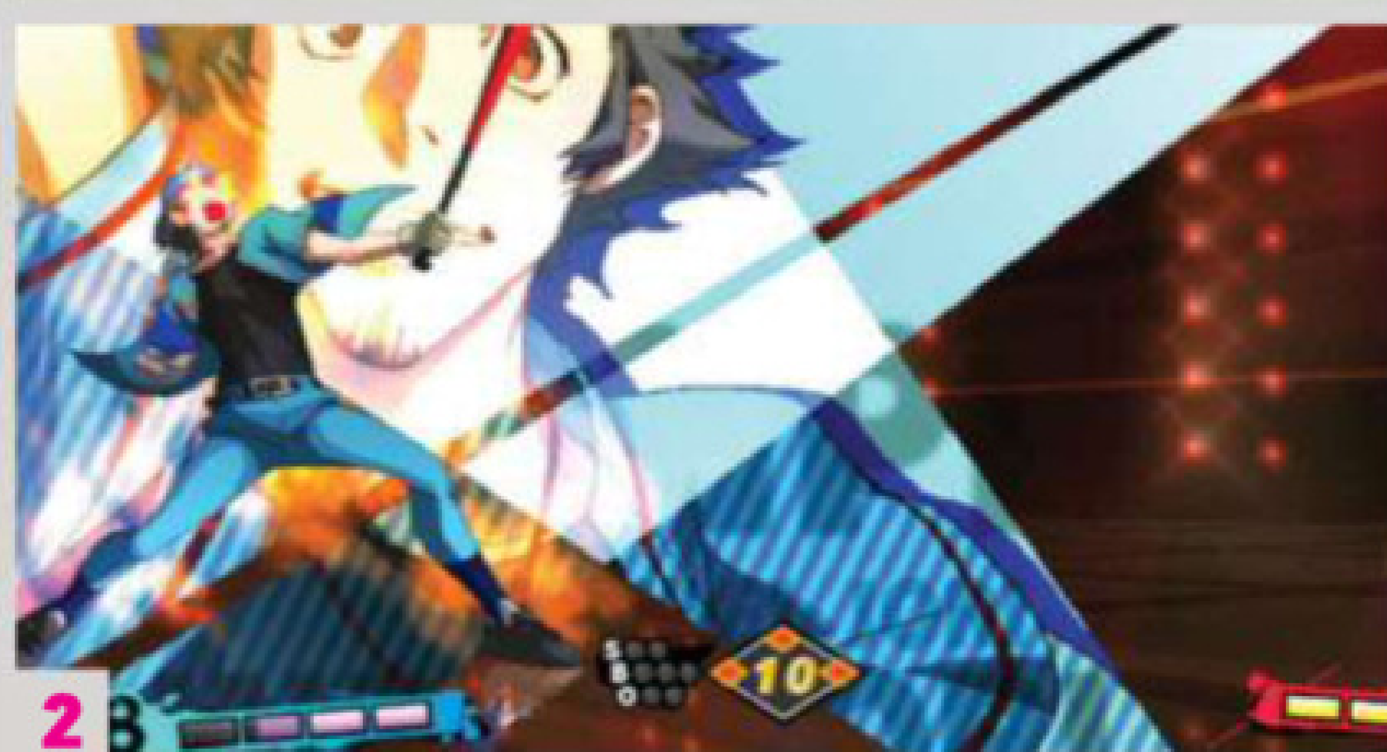
ESSENTIALS

10 GIMMICKY FIGHTERS

■ If every developer just relied on the same mechanics for fighting games, we'd have gotten bored of them a long, *long* time ago. Thankfully, there is continued innovation in the genre. The downside of that is, someone always suggests "Hey, if we can do *that*, why can't we do *this*?" And of course, there's never a reasonable argument against it, and then we end up with characters like Gon in Tekken 3…



1



2



3



4



5

Mokujin (Tekken)
Developer: Namco

1 Mokujin – the literal Japanese translation of which is 'Wooden Person' – is a training dummy supposedly brought to life by the presence of pure evil, to save the Earth when no other human can. The first of his kind in a fighting game, Mokujin is the personification of the 'random character' icon on the fighter select screen: he has no discernible fighting style of his own, but rather mimics other *Tekken* fighters – imitating a different character each round of the fight. If Mokujin needs extra parts for his vicious attacks – Roger's tail, Yoshimitsu's sword and so on – he can just attach add-on parts. Absolutely wonderful.

Junpei Iori (Persona 4 Arena Ultimax)
Developer: Arc System Works

2 Coming from the Atlus-developed RPGs and being wrangled to fit into a fighting game, Arc System Works was probably in heaven – the studio of gimmicky fighters had an excuse to run rampant. Never is this clearer than with Junpei Iori – a character that needs to basically play a game of baseball in the middle of a match to get to a level usual characters are at as standard. By hitting 10 home runs (which includes loading bases and avoiding strikeouts) Junpei can activate 'Victory Cry', which will constantly restore his health, stacking attack buffs on his normal moves, too. He's a difficult character to master, but worth it.

Twelve (Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike)
Developer: Capcom

3 Twelve is one of the weakest characters in *Third Strike* – his stamina and defence are both below average, and struggles to inflict a decent amount of damage. However, he is the only character that can air-dash, giving him a big advantage over other fighters (especially slower ones). Twelve also has the ability to press himself to the ground and crawl, resulting in a character that can easily dodge the majority of the game's projectile-based attacks while gaining ground on the opponent. Compound that with a series of good pokes and an invisibility taunt, and Twelve can actually out-perform his 'low tier' ranking with ease.

Chang/Choi (Capcom vs SNK 2)
Developer: Capcom

4 Most characters Chang's size in games are powerhouses, requiring 360-degree rotations of the stick to pull off huge slam-based power attacks. Chang's a bit different, mostly because of his little friend Choi who he uses as a projectile. Chang and Choi were both characters taken from the *King Of Fighters* series, and teaming them up in the Capcom/SNK sequel leads to a character with all the pros of a big fighter with some nasty projectile moves courtesy of the Freddy Krueger-inspired Choi. Chang deals damage with his normal attacks, but hit up K Groove at the start of the battle, and you get a 1.35x damage multiplier, too!

Yoda (Soulcalibur IV)
Developer: Project Soul/ Namco

5 Probably the worst character to ever fall kicking and screaming into a fighting game, Yoda was a joke. Where fellow Star Wars characters Darth Vader, and the laughably named Starkiller, used a 'Force meter' to imbue their attacks with the mysterious psychic power, Yoda merely used it to become a more irritating version of himself, flitting about for no good reason – having to flip into throws, being too small to occupy most fighters' hitboxes and dealing out almost negligible damage. He was banned from most fighting game tournaments, initially because of his Xbox 360 exclusivity, but was soon after unbanned.















Phoenix Wright (Marvel Vs Capcom 3)
Developer: Capcom

6 We had a debate whether to include the levelling-based Frank West or Phoenix Wright here – both are incredibly gimmicky. But Frank is probably one of the best characters in *Ultimate Marvel Vs. Capcom 3*, so instead we'll focus on Wright. Wright takes the comedy and lawyer-ly leanings of his main series into the ring with *Ultimate*, but for the best – starting off as an incredibly defensive character, you have to acquire three pieces of good evidence to buff your stats to a playable level. In Trial Mode, Wright gains the ability to toss his evidence at his enemies as a projectile. It's all very convoluted, and not very worth it.

Shun Di (Virtua Fighter)
Developer: Sega

7 Shun is a character that you need to get drunk as soon as possible. The round begins, hit the bottle. Some moves help you get drunk quicker – his neutral throw allows him to neck two units, one of his heavy attacks (if it lands) rounds off with him downing five units. The more you get Shun Di to put away, the more attacks he has access to. Even his launcher can only be accessed after gaining four Drinks Points, but once Shun's topped up enough, the old man can start wailing on enemies like never before, with a series of, quite frankly, *ridiculous* attacks that are both quick and powerful.

Watson (Battle Fantasia)
Developer: Arc System Works

8 Watson is a small rabbit wearing a wizard's hat – making him one of the more bizarre entries in Arc System Works' already bizarre picture-book fighter. The leporine fighter operated on an interesting premise, whereby he'd level up with damage dealt, but de-level if he took damage – an interesting choice to give to the wizard when you realise that he had a lower defence rating than any other character in the game. Still, he could – at a high level – launch enemies into an infinite combo that took off one point per hit; meaning you'd time out before killing them, usually. How's *that* for a gimmick?

Carl Clover (BlazBlue)
Developer: Arc System Works

9 Another alumni of Arc System Works' incredible but likely unsafe brains, Carl Clover is a 'dividual' character, meaning he and his automaton partner, Nirvana, work asynchronous – two face buttons controlling Carl while the other two control Nirvana. To make any progress with Carl, you practically have to learn to use two characters at once, and master placing Nirvana around the screen to follow up Carl's admittedly weak attacks. Chain it right, though, and you can unleash one hell of a combo – capable of taking off a decent chunk of the enemy's health bar in one fell swoop.

PTX-40A (Tatsunoko vs Capcom)
Developer: Eighting

10 This niche Wii fighting game behaved like something caught between the traditional *Marvel Vs Capcom* games and the tag-in mechanics of *Tekken Tag Tournament*. PTX-40A took up both character slots, meaning you couldn't pull off partner-specific moves, but were granted hit-stun immunity to compensate. The cons of a 'Giant' character like PTX arguably outweigh the pros – he couldn't defend against any cinematic moves, for example – but the mech's ability to punish characters that ran away, and his wide array of mixup moves, made him a formidable opponent if you came to fight someone that knew what they were doing with him.

THE VAULT

RAZER ATROX FOR XBOX ONE

MANUFACTURER: **RAZER** PRICE: **£179.99**



FOR THOSE THAT want an authentic arcade experience from the Xbox One, Razer has released the sequel to its popular Atrox controller on Xbox 360. The redesigned unit will feel very familiar to those that used the previous version, featuring high-quality Sanwa Hardware components, but it also has a few tricks up its sleeve.

For a start, the buttons, joystick and the controller's top panel are all customisable – Razer has designed everything to be easy to remove and replace. So if you're hankering for Hello Kitty buttons or a face plate that features your actual face staring back up at you as you mash buttons, it's easy. Inside the casing you'll find a honeycomb structure that makes it straightforward to move different controls around to your needs, so you can get the perfect personal setup without too much hassle.

There's even a storage area inside the casing, giving you the space to keep a screwdriver, a spare joystick, and even a couple of spare buttons. This controller marks the end of you blaming the controller for repeatedly getting your ass handed to you in *Killer Instinct*.

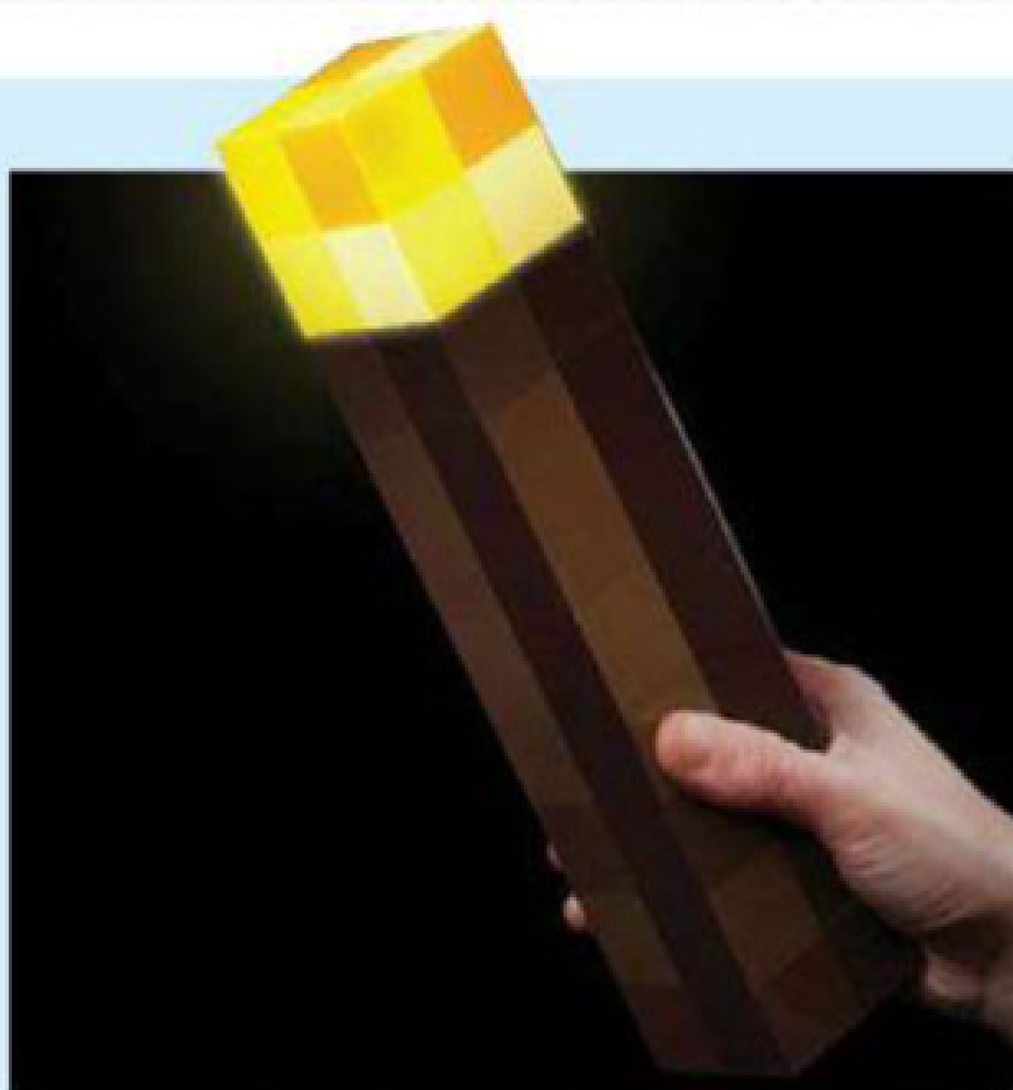
The internals can be accessed with the touch of a button on the side of the controller's casing, and it includes that screwdriver and spare joystick so you can get modding right away.



PLAYSTATION CONTROLLER CUFFLINKS

Sometimes, gaming is frowned upon. At business meetings, at your wedding… But now you can show your true colours when you're looking your best, thanks to these nifty PlayStation cufflinks.

www.yellowbulldog.co.uk



MINECRAFT LIGHT-UP TORCH

This blocky torch is your perfect companion in deep caverns as you search for hidden diamonds. Or you could just wall-mount it in your bedroom; either way, you'll stop monsters from spawning uncontrollably.

www.firebox.com



ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY BI-FOLD WALLET

When you consider how much money Assassins earn from their ventures, it only seems right that they need wallets. This one is available in blue or brown, and is perfect for storing pilfered Francs.

www.gamerabilia.co.uk

GAMING CLOTHING



WITCHER CHAINMAIL WOOL TROYER

This warm, hand-knitted wool troyer is inspired by chainmail from *The Witcher* and offers that classic 'I'm gonna go slay some monsters' look. It's even got a White Wolf symbol on the shoulder.

www.musterbrand.com



CARTRIDGE OF TIME

We miss the time when blowing on a piece of technology made it work again. If you want to relive those days, grab this shirt, featuring Link blowing into his latest mystical accessory – a NES cartridge.

www.teefury.com



OLD GAMER

If you find yourself thinking that games these days aren't like they used to be, and that kids have it all too easy, you might want to invest in this T-shirt.

www.threadless.com



CUSTOM DESIGNED CONTROLLER

DISTRIBUTOR: **THE CONTROLLER SHOP**
PRICE: **£119.99**

IF YOU WANT a unique controller, The Controller Shop should be your first port of call. The website allows you to design your own controller from scratch, changing every part to get the perfect set-up. From patterned front faces to coloured buttons, sticks and secondary parts, you can completely alter the look of your controller, then change options like removing the rumble motors and adding extra pedals that you can hook up to your controller for extra abilities. They're expensive, but so goddamn cool.

www.thecontrollershop.com

PS4 LIGHT BAR DECALS

DISTRIBUTOR: **FLAMINGTOAST**
PRICE: **£2.25**

SONY'S LIGHT BAR is a great idea, but who said it ever had to be a simple light? The big, bright bar was designed to help the PlayStation Eye camera, but for those who didn't invest in the camera, the bar is simply cosmetic. So why not jazz things up with these cool light bar decals? You can choose from dozens of designs, all of which will help you tell controllers apart and make your DualShocks badass.

www.flamingtoast.com



RETRO NINTENDO CONSOLE SKIN

DISTRIBUTOR: **DECALGIRL** PRICE: **£29.99**

IF YOU MISS the good old days of classic retro gaming but still love your PS4 or Xbox One, this decal can help you bring the old to the new in just a few simple minutes. Decalgirl.com has hundreds of designs that you can add to your console to give it a new look, but this retro NES-inspired decal will bring the fond memories flooding back. It's available in two finishes – a high gloss vinyl, or the more NES-like matte finish. It'll even make your current-generation console a little more scratch resistant – because we're a bit precious about our £300 plus machines aren't we?

www.decalgirl.com



SEGA MEGA DRIVE/ GENESIS: COLLECTED WORKS (LIMITED EDITION HARDCOVER)



PUBLISHER: **READ-ONLY MEMORY**

THIS BEAUTIFUL BOOK is a Sega enthusiast's dream. It opens with an introduction by David Perry, the man behind *The Terminator, Aladdin* and *Earthworm Jim*. You're walked through a full history of the console that helped define gaming in the Eighties, with insights into every part of Sega's business, from hardware development to advertising.

Next you can explore pages and pages of stunning hardware photography, sketches, and artwork from a range of huge Mega Drive games. It's a real trip down memory lane for those who owned and loved Sega's biggest console, but any gamer will be able to appreciate the artwork on offer. The fold-out blueprints of the console give a nice insight into how the whole thing was built – and offer a handy way to show kids just how lucky they are to have the ergonomic controllers they're used to today.

A large portion of the book is dedicated to lovely pixel art from your favourite titles – it's great to see artwork like this given the recognition it deserves. The back of the book is packed with interviews with those involved in making the Mega Drive and its games. These in-depth discussions with the experts are well worth a read, giving great insights into the development of the console and its games.

The only downside to the book is that it simply isn't big enough to cover every Mega Drive game out there. Most notably, the book misses out on third-party games from the likes of Namco and Taito. Still, for those that loved Sega's console, it's an absolute must-buy.

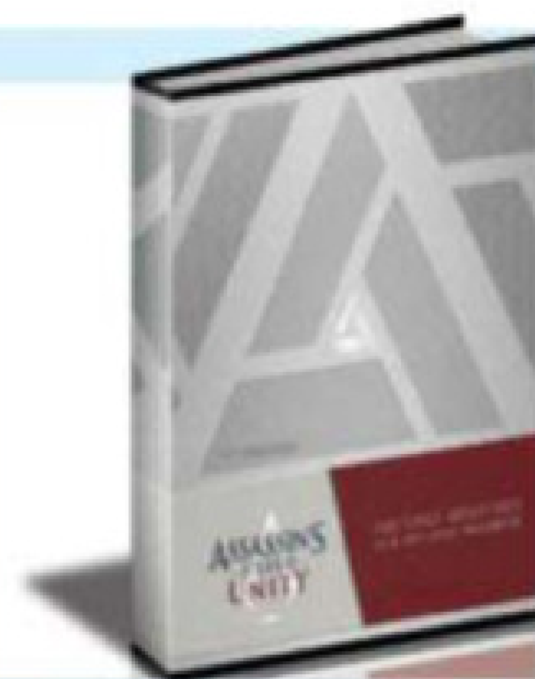
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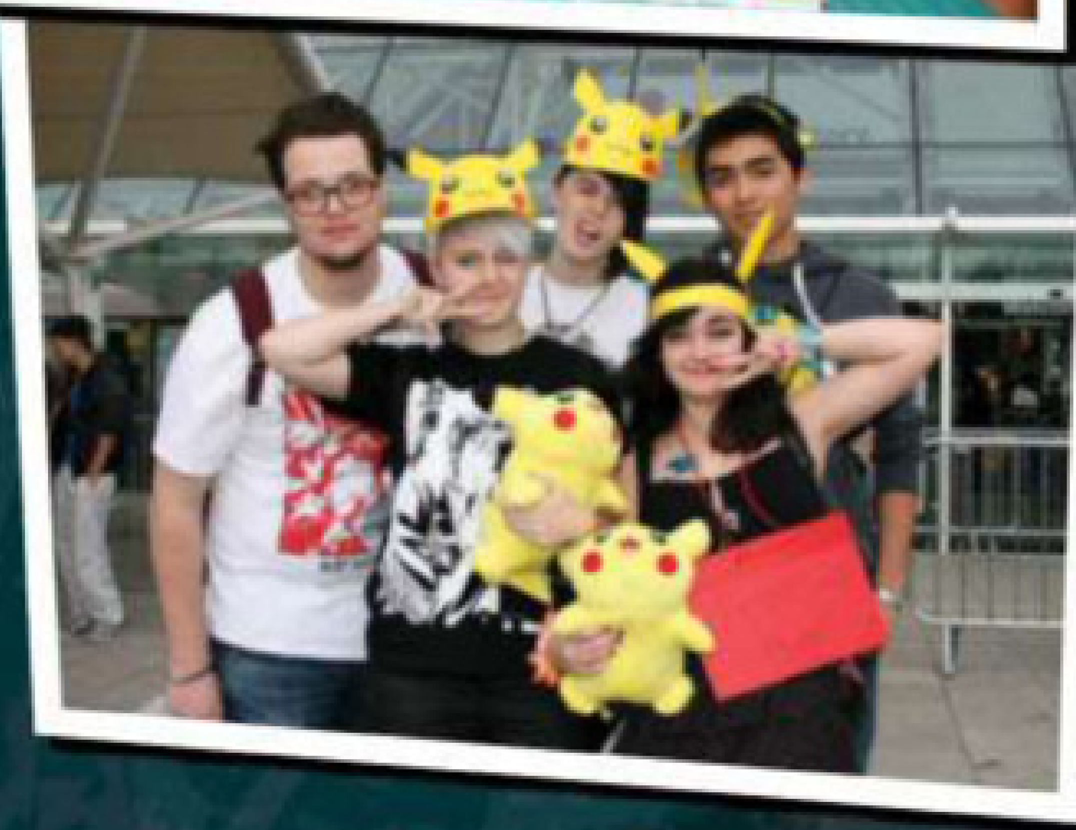
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